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EXPLORING THE GREEK-LETTER ORGANIZATION EXPERIENCE AT PRIMARILY COMMUTER PUBLIC COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

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BY

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ABSTRACT

Higher education institutions are typically designed for residential students (Attewell & Lavin, 2012; Jacoby, 2015), even though the majority of students at four-year colleges and universities commute to their campuses (Horn & Nevill, 2006). One part of the higher education structure is the co-curricular experience, and is a way for students to develop a sense of belonging on campus, which leads to positive outcomes like self-actualization and persistence (Strayhorn, 2012, 2019). Greek-letter organizations are one aspect of the co-curricular experience, yet are also typically designed with residential students in mind. These organizations, however, have been present at primarily commuter institutions and admitted commuter students for decades (Heida, 1986), yet very few studies have examined the experience of commuter students in Greek-letter organizations (e.g., Yearwood & Jones, 2012), and none have done so using qualitative research. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore the experience of commuter students in Greek-letter organizations at primarily commuter public institutions, using sense of belonging as a conceptual framework.

Nine alumni who were commuter students in Greek-letter organizations from four primarily commuter public higher education institutions were interviewed for this study. The primary research question for this study was: *How do alumni who were commuter students and members of Greek-letter organizations at primarily commuter public institutions describe their member experience?* Secondary research questions were: *What comprised the experience of belonging for these alumni? What, if anything, lead to or detracted from their sense of belonging?* And *how, if at all, did*

their membership contribute to their sense of belonging on campus?

To answer these questions, I engaged in semi-structured interviews with the participants, and analyzed the data using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Four themes arose from the data: (1) seeking to belong, (2) personal connections, (3) welcoming and accepting members, and (4) belonging beyond the chapter. Using the findings, I developed recommendations for chapters and alumni advisors, college and university administrators, and Greek-letter organization national headquarters.

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Lastly, but most importantly, I would like to thank my participants. I literally could not have done this work without you. I am eternally grateful for the time you took out of your busy professional lives to talk with me about your experiences. My

hope is that I have done you and your stories justice, and that we can start to bring more attention the experiences of commuter students in Greek-letter organizations.

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INTRODUCTION

Higher education is changing. While as a society we generally think of the college experience as one where a student moves away to a residence hall for four years, the reality is that 70 percent of students at four-year colleges and universities commute to campus (Horn & Nevill, 2006). Further, the number of primarily non-residential four-year public institutions has increased by over 22 percent since 2005 (Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and Learning, 2010; Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research, 2018). Even with such a large number of students commuting, we know very little about their experience; and we know even less about those commuter students who choose to join a Greek-letter organization while attending a primarily commuter public institution. This study intends to address this issue by exploring this particular experience.

This first chapter will serve as an overview to the study, beginning with a more thorough statement of the problem I wish to address. I will then provide some background information in a brief literature review, articulate the purpose of the study in more detail, outline my research questions, and describe the significance of the study. This chapter will end by orienting the reader to a few key terms used throughout the dissertation, and providing a roadmap for what to expect in the coming chapters.

Statement of the Problem

Even though the majority of students that attend four-year colleges and universities commute (Horn & Nevill, 2006), higher education structures and practices generally are designed for residential students (Attewell & Lavin, 2012; Jacoby, 2015). Further, commuter students differ in some ways from their residential peers, primarily because they typically hold multiple responsibilities besides being a student, such as working multiple jobs or being responsible for family members. Those responsibilities, in addition to the need to travel, lead to commuter students having only a limited amount of time to spend on campus (Burlison, 2015; Wilmes & Quade, 1986). Still, despite their responsibilities and limited time, commuter students' academic engagement is comparable to those students who live on campus (Kuh, Gonyea, & Palmer, 2001).

A student's academic experience, however, is only a piece of the overall college student experience. Since the founding of America's oldest colleges, students have engaged in co-curricular activities that provided them the opportunity to interact with one another away from the classrooms and (watchful eyes of) faculty members (Thelin, 2011). Student interaction, both in and out of class with their peers, faculty members, and administrators, is essential to developing a sense of belonging on campus (Manley Lima, 2014; Strayhorn, 2012, 2019). Strayhorn has argued that since sense of belonging leads to student success, an institution's ability to assist a student with developing a sense of belonging directly relates to their ability to fulfill their mission. Therefore, designing higher education institutions in ways that primarily support the academic and co-curricular experiences of residential students is

problematic because it can lead to commuter students feeling like an institution's activities and services are not for them, even at primarily commuter colleges and universities (Weiss, 2014).

Participating in a Greek-letter organization is one way that students are able to develop a sense of belonging (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Strayhorn, 2012, 2019). Very little of the research on Greek-letter organizations, however, has focused on the experiences of commuter students, especially those at primarily commuter institutions. Instead, most of the research either focuses on the experiences of members who live in affiliated housing (e.g., Rhoads, 1995) or uses large data sets that do not disaggregate findings for commuter students or primarily commuter institutions, if that information is even collected at all (e.g., DeBard & Sacks, 2011). This is unfortunate, because over 30 years ago Heida (1986) wrote an essay that outlined the benefits of Greek-letter organization membership for both commuter students and their host institutions. There is a need to understand the experience of commuter students in these organizations at primarily commuter public colleges and universities better so that higher education institutions and national Greek-letter organizations can institute policies and practices that are supportive of this student population.

Background

While chapter two will entail a full literature review, this section will briefly outline the three main areas of literature that inform this study: (1) commuter students, (2) Greek-letter organization membership, and (3) sense of belonging.

Commuter Students

Commuter students are a diverse group that have typically been defined as any student who does not live in a residence that is owned by the institution (Jacoby, 2000b), and includes over 70% of students in four-year higher education (Horn & Nevill, 2006). When compared with their residential peers, commuter students are more likely to hold a variety of life roles (Burlison, 2015); work more hours (Graham, Socorro Hurtado & Gonyea, 2018; Newbold, Mehta, & Forbus, 2011); and be students of color (Graham et al.; Kuh et al., 2001), first-generation, and/or from lower socio-economic status families (Gianoutsos & Rosser, 2014). With their multiple responsibilities, residence being away from campus, and having a need to work, time becomes a limited resource for commuter students (Burlison, 2015; Clay, 2016; Kirk & Lewis, 2015; Wilmes & Quade, 1986).

Academically, however, commuter students are roughly as engaged as their peers as measured by the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE; Kuh et al., 2001). While studies using the NSSE have found that residential students out-perform commuter students in some areas, living on campus generally only has a small-to-medium effect on engagement (Graham et al., 2018; Kuh et al.). Similarly, commuter students persist from their first-to-second year at similar rates as residential students, with academic and social integration being a more important predictor for retention than a student's residence (Ishitani & Reid, 2015).

Even with their multiple responsibilities, commuter students are interested in becoming involved on campus (Alfano & Eduljee, 2013). Numerous studies have found that student involvement is associated with positive outcomes (Mayhew et al.,

2016), including developing a sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2012, 2019), even for commuter students (Manley Lima, 2014). The structures to promote involvement, however, have to be conducive to the needs and experiences of commuter students, which includes scheduling events at times that work for them (Clay, 2016; Kirk & Lewis, 2015; Weiss, 2014). Providing a variety of involvement experiences for these students, including Greek-letter organizations, is also important (Clay; Heida, 1986).

Greek-Letter Organization Membership

Greek-letter organizations, which have been a part of American higher education since 1776 (Owen, 1991) lead to both positive and negative outcomes for their members. For example, membership has been found to make a significant difference in retention (Biddix, Singer, & Aslinger, 2018; Biddix, Singer, Bureau, Nicholson, & Ishitani, 2019; Bowman & Holmes, 2017; DeBard & Sacks, 2011), leadership, (Hevel, Martin, Goodman, & Pascarella, 2018), student satisfaction (Hayek, Carini, O'Day, & Kuh, 2002), faculty-student interaction, active and collaborative learning (Hayek et al.; Pike, 2003), and a perception of a supportive campus (Pike). Yet membership has also been found to be associated with excessive drinking (Biddix, Matney, Norman, & Martin, 2014; Weschler, Kuh, & Davenport, 1996), sexism (Ray & Rosow, 2010; Rhoads, 1995; Sasso, 2015), elitism (Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013; Matthews, Featherstone, Bluder, Gerling, Loge, & Messenger, 2009), homophobia (DeSantis & Coleman, 2013; Rankin & Hesp, 2013), racism (Gillon, Beatty, & Salinas, 2019; Syrett, 2009), and hazing (Newer, 1999; Parks, 2017; Sasso).

With over 750,000 undergraduate members of more than 91 fraternities and sororities at over 800 colleges and universities (North American Interfraternity Conference, 2019; National Panhellenic Conference, 2020), the Greek-letter organization member experience is, as one might expect, complex. Culturally-based organizations, for example, have difference practices and assumptions than historically White organizations (Parks, 2008; Torbenson & Parks, 2009). These organizations were founded to support students with a variety of social identities including, but not limited to, Asian American (Chen, 2009), Black (Brown, Parks, & Phillips, 2005), Deaf (Stapleton & Nicolazzo, 2019), Gay (Yeung, 2009), Latino/a (Muñoz & Guardia, 2009), and Native American (Minthorn & Youngbull, 2020). Membership experience also varies by chapter size (Jabs, 2018), by chapters within the same national organization (Cohen, McCreary, & Schutts, 2017; McCreary & Schutts, 2015), and by chapters at the same institution (DeSantis, 2007). Other institutional characteristics such as size (Dowiak, 2016) and institutional culture (McCreary, Bray, & Thoma, 2016) have also been found to influence the membership experience.

Campus environment theory suggests that institutions and the experiences that students have at their college or university are shaped in part by the characteristics of the students at the institution, including the proportion of students who commute (Strange & Banning, 2001; 2015). Unfortunately, very little research up to this point has included the experiences of Greek-letter organization members who also commute, and only three specifically measure outcomes for those students at primarily commuter institutions. One study found that membership in a fraternity at one commuter campus was associated with academic success for Black students

(Yearwood & Jones, 2012). Two more recent study compared retention rates for first-year sorority women with unaffiliated first-year women, and found that joining a sorority at a predominantly commuter institution was associated with higher retention rates (Biddix et al., 2018; Biddix et al., 2019).

Sense of Belonging

Sense of belonging, which will serve as the conceptual framework for this study, has been described by researchers in a number of ways. Maslow (1970) considered it to be an intermediary requirement between one's most basic needs and self-actualization. Building from Maslow's work, Strayhorn (2012) described it as "basic human need…and develops in response to the degree to which an individual feels respected, valued, accepted, and needed by a defined group" (p. 87). Others have also emphasized the social nature of belonging: Tinto (1987) connected it with a student's integration into a college, Bean (1985) with "fit," Baumeister and Leary (1995) described belonging as "lasting, positive, and significant interpersonal relationships…in the context of a temporally stable and enduring of affective concern for each other's welfare" (p. 497), and Goodenow (1993) described it as "the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the school social environment" (p. 80). A common thread throughout these definitions is the dependence upon connecting with others in a way that makes a person feel like they matter. Further, developing a sense of belonging as a college student is associated with a number of positive outcomes such as an easier transition to college (Hurtado & Carter, 1997), develop self-efficacy (Freeman, Anderman, & Jensen, 2007), greater retention rates (Hausmann, Schofield, & Woods, 2007;

Hausmann, Ye, Schofield, & Woods, 2009), and more complex levels of personal development (Strayhorn, 2012, 2019).

The process of developing a sense of belonging, and the experiences that contribute or detract from it, is nuanced and will be explored further in chapter two. However, one experience that has been largely associated with belonging is campus involvement (Bowman, Jarratt, Jang, & Bono, 2019; Johnson et al., 2007; Li, 2018; Manley Lima, 2014; Strayhorn, 2012, 2019; Vaccaro & Newman, 2016). Students who become involved through membership in a fraternity or sorority have been found to describe belonging as part of their construction of "brotherhood" (McCreary & Schutts, 2015) or "sisterhood" (Cohen et al., 2017), and report that it contributes to their sense of belonging at their institutions (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Johnson & Larabee, 2003; Long & Snowden, 2011; Maestas, Vaquera, & Zehr, 2007; Strayhorn). Greek-letter organization members also experience some of the benefits associated with belonging at higher rates than their unaffiliated peers such as connection to the community (Lounsbury & DeNeui, 1995), retention (e.g., Bowman & Holmes, 2017), and personal development (Pike, 2003).

Purpose of the Study

The intersecting literature of commuter students and Greek-letter organizations is not just sparse, but also is all quantitative in design and focused on outcomes of membership, not the membership experience itself. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to fill the gap in the literature by centering on the experience of commuter students in Greek-letter organizations from primarily commuter public institutions, using sense of belonging as a conceptual lens. This will be accomplished by

interviewing alumni of Greek-letter organizations from this institutional type, because as graduates, they are able to discuss their entire college experience.

Research Questions

This study has one primary research question and three secondary research questions. The primary question is: *How do alumni who were commuter students and members of Greek-letter organizations at primarily commuter public institutions describe their member experience?* The secondary research questions are:

1. *What comprised the experience of belonging for these alumni?*
2. *What, if anything, lead to or detracted from their sense of belonging?*
3. *How, if at all, did their membership contribute to their sense of belonging on campus?*

Significance of the Study

This study is significant because it addresses a number of gaps in the literature. It adds to the literature on commuter students by exploring the experience of those students who joined Greek-letter organizations. Similarly, the qualitative design of this study adds richness to the small body of Greek-letter organization literature that specifically includes commuter students, but uses quantitative methods (e.g., Yearwood & Jones, 2012). Finally, it adds to the literature on sense of belonging because the participants, as alumni, are able to discuss belonging throughout their entire collegiate experience, rather than just the first-year experience, on which most of the college student belonging literature focuses (e.g., Hausmann et al., 2009; Tachine, Cabrera, & Yellow Bird, 2017). Addressing these gaps in the literature will provide implications for policy and practice that can be implemented by higher

education institutions and Greek-letter organization chapters and national headquarters.

Definition of Key Terms

There are a number of key terms that are important to this study that will be defined in this section.

Alumnus/a – A person, or people who graduated from a higher education institution (plural *alumni/ae*).

Campus-based advisor – The college or university staff person or people whose role is to administer and advise the Greek-letter organizations and related programming.

Chapter – The institution-level entity of a national Greek-letter organization.

College or university – A four-year higher education institution. It may also be referred to as an "institution."

Commuter student – An undergraduate student that does not live in a facility that is owned, operated, or controlled by a college, university (Jacoby, 2000b), or Greek-letter organization entity such as an alumni corporation, housing corporation, or national organization.

Culturally-based Greek-letter organization – A primarily social Greek-letter organization that was founded to support students who are members of a particular identity.

Fraternity – A primarily social organization for college students and alumni who are male and/or identify as men.

Greek-letter organization – An umbrella term for primarily social organizations that typically use Greek letters in the name of their organizations. It is broader than the terms "fraternity" or "sorority" because co-educational organizations are also encompassed within this term. The term is used in this study because one participate was a member of a co-educational organization, however, the terms "fraternity/ies," "sorority/ies," and "fraternity/ies and sorority/ies" will be used when referencing literature that explicitly identified participants as members of those groups.

Member – A student or alumnus who holds membership in a Greek-letter organization.

National headquarters – The entity that oversees chapter recognition, develops practices, implements educational programming, enforces policies, and cultivates alumni relations. If the Greek-letter organization has housed chapters, the national headquarters will be involved with the oversight, management, and policy development for those properties in some capacity. The national headquarters may or may not have a physical space, and may or may not have paid employees. Like all non-profit organizations, there is board of directors that oversees the Greek-letter organization at the national level.

New member – A student that is in the process of joining a Greek-letter organization, who also may be referred to as an "associate member" or "pledge."

New member education – The process that occurs prior to becoming a full member when students learn about the history, purpose, and operations of an organization. This may also be referred to as "the associate member process," "intake process," or "pledging."

Potential new member – A student who is interested in joining a Greek-letter organization, but has yet to be formally accepted as a new member. Potential new members may also be referred to as "interests."

Primarily commuter institution **–** Four-year colleges and universities that are classified within the Carnegie Classification as "primarily nonresidential institutions," which are colleges and universities with fewer than 25% of their students housed in institutionally-owned, -operated, or –controlled facilities; and/or have fewer than 50% of their students enrolled full-time (Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research, 2017).

Sorority - A primarily social organization for college students and alumni who are female and/or identify as women.

Students – People who are currently enrolled at a four-year college or university.

Unaffiliated students – College students who are not members of primarily social Greek-letter organizations.

Chapter Summary

This chapter provided a brief overview of the background for this study. The literature on commuter students, Greek-letter organizations, and college student sense of belonging supports the need for a study that explores the experiences of commuter students in Greek-letter organizations at primarily commuter public institutions. The qualitative design of this study will supplement the very limited quantitative research that has explicitly included commuter students in Greek-letter organizations, add to the small body of literature on commuter students by specifically exploring the experience of those who choose to join these organizations, and give a more complete

understanding to belonging by interviewing alumni. Most important in addressing this gap in the literature, however, are the benefits colleges and national organizations can reap in order to support Greek-letter organization membership for commuter students.

Organization of the Study

The remainder of this study is organized in four chapters. Chapter two will review the literature on commuter students, Greek-letter organizations, and sense of belonging. The methodology for the study, including descriptions of participants, and the process for collecting and analyzing data will be described in chapter three. Chapter four will be a presentation of the findings from the study. Finally, chapter five will discuss how the findings answer the research questions, suggest areas for future research, and provide recommendations for chapters, institutions, and national organizations.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The purpose of this study is to explore the experience of commuter students in Greek-letter organizations at public primarily commuter colleges and universities. The majority of this chapter will provide a review of the relevant literature pertaining to commuter students and Greek-letter organization membership. Since the higher education literature rarely focuses on commuter students (Burlison, 2015), and generally only explores the negative aspects of Greek-letter organizations (Biddix, Matney, Norman, & Martin, 2014), this review will present a broad overview to orient the reader, and specifically highlight the literature related to this study. The first section of this chapter will review the literature on commuter students. Following that will be a section dedicated to the Greek-letter organization membership literature. Finally, a third section of this chapter will discuss the literature on sense of belonging, which serves as the conceptual framework for this study. Sense of belonging has been explored already in both the commuter student (Manley Lima, 2014) and Greek-letter organization membership literature (e.g., McCreary & Schutts, 2015). Similarly, there is some, albeit limited, research on commuter students in Greek-letter organizations (e.g., Yearwood & Jones, 2012), however, unrelated to belonging. Throughout this review, it will become evident that there is a need for more work at the intersection of these three areas, which is the gap this study seeks to fill.

Commuter Students

Commuter students have traditionally been defined as those students who do not live in facilities owned, operated, or controlled by a college or university (Jacoby, 2000b). While the American college experience was designed to be a residential one (Thelin, 2011), the majority of students in four-year institutions of higher education today commute to campus, with one report indicating that 70% of students do not live in institutional housing (Horn & Nevill, 2006).

The Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education Institutions classify those institutions with a particularly high proportion of commuter students – those with at least 75% commuting and/or fewer than 50% of students attending full-time –as "primarily nonresidential." Even with the prevalence of commuter students in institutions of higher education today, college and university structures are still typically designed for the "traditional" full-time residential student (Attewell & Lavin, 2012; Jacoby, 2015).

As the literature in this section reveals, commuter students are similar to their residential peers in some ways, but differ in others, and have specific needs and experiences to which higher education institutions should attend. Unfortunately, the corpus of higher education research generally does not pay specific attention to commuter students (Burlison, 2015). What we do know about this student population comes mostly from a handful of studies. This section will report the findings from those studies, describing the characteristics of, and challenges faced by, commuter students, as well as academic outcomes, involvement, and sense of belonging as they relate to this population.

Characteristics

Kuh, Gonyea, and Palmer (2001) and Graham, Socorro Hurtado, and Gonyea (2018) used data from the National Study of Student Engagement (NSSE) to compare the academic engagement of residential students, students who lived within walking distance to campus, and those who drove to campus. In addition to their engagement findings, which are presented later, their publications also included descriptive statistics of residential and commuter students. While they provide no analysis of statistical differences, the findings still yield some practical significance.

Kuh and his colleagues' (2001) study of more than 105,000 first-year and senior students found that commuter students were more likely to be 24 or older, students of color, spend more time taking care of dependents, be first-generation students, and work more hours off campus. The nearly 95,000 full-time first-year student participants in the second study (Graham et al.) had similar demographics. The commuter students in this study were also more likely to be older (their threshold, however was 20 years of age since their sample was first-year students), first-generation, and students of color. They also found that commuter students were more likely to work than residential students, but even when residential students worked, they still worked fewer hours that commuter students. While they did not measure the time students spent taking care of dependents as in the first study, they did ask about transfer status and found that commuter students were more likely to be transfer students than residential students. Again, even though they did not test for statistical differences, the similarities between the studies, which analyzed data from 2000 and

2001 (Kuh et al.) and then 2013 to 2016 (Graham et al.), does hold practical significance in terms of understanding the characteristics of commuter students.

Smaller, single-campus studies have also supported these findings. They found that commuter students are more likely to be older, transfer students (Newbold, Mehta, & Forbus, 2011), be first-generation, from a lower socioeconomic status family, and be Latinx than residential students (Gianoutsos & Rosser, 2014). Two studies yielded mixed results about whether or not there is a statistical difference between the amount of time commuter and residential students work (Alfano & Eduljee, 2013; Newbold et al.), which could be a function of sample size or institutional characteristics, such as tuition costs and the availability of scholarships.

Challenges

Commuter students have a number of challenges they have to contend with related to their college experience. Four of these areas are the need to work (Alfano & Eduljee, 2013; Burlison, 2015; Clay, 2016; Gefen & Fish, 2013; Newbold et al., 2011; Weiss, 2014; Wilmes & Quade, 1986), caring for others (Clay, 2016; Pokorny, Holley, & Kane, 2017; Wilmes & Quade, 1986), the need to travel to campus (Banning & Hughes, 1986; Clay, 2016; Gefen & Fish, 2013; Weiss, 2014), and stress (Alfano & Eduljee; Gefen & Fish; Weiss, 2014). Clay pointedly addressed the effect these challenges have on the commuter student experience: “On any given day, commuter students encounter a host of issues that can negatively affect their college experiences…including when cars break down, they are delayed in traffic, they sleep in, or they are negatively affected by weather” (p. 100).

Work. The need to balance school and work has been one area that has received much attention within the literature related to commuter students (Alfano & Eduljee, 2013; Burlison, 2015; Clay, 2016; Gefen & Fish, 2013; Newbold et al., 2011; Weiss, 2014; Wilmes & Quade, 1986). As described previously, two studies yielded mixed results as to whether or not commuter students work statistically more than residential ones (Alfano & Eduljee, 2013; Newbold et al., 2011). Even so, the proportion of commuter students who work is greater than residential students, and the greatest proportion of students who are working more than 20 hours a week are those commuters who drive to their college or university (Graham et al. 2018; Kuh et al., 2001). Indeed, Kuh and his team found that 40 percent of students who drove to campus worked more than 20 hours per week.

Other research has added some color to these statistics. In addition to working more, commuter students work for difference reasons. Alfano and Eduljee (2013) found that of the top three reasons why students work, paying tuition was the second most cited reason for both residential and commuter students. The first reason, however, was earning spending money for residential students, while it was paying bills and rent for commuter students. This is not to say, however, that working is completely detrimental to a student's experience. Working on campus allows students to connect with faculty, staff, and administrators, as well as develop a sense of belonging (Manley Lima, 2014; Weiss, 2014). Lang (2012), however, found in his single-institutional study that students who worked on campus were more likely to be juniors and seniors, which suggests that first-year students and sophomores either do not know about campus jobs, or the jobs on campus are prioritized to those students

who already hold them. Working off-campus can still benefit students, however, since it is more strongly related to leadership self-efficacy than working on campus (Dugan, Garland, Jacoby, & Gasiorski, 2008).

Caring for Others. On top of being students, commuter students may also be responsible for dependents – whether that is a child, partner, or another family member (Clay, 2016; Pokorny et al., 2017; Wilmes & Quade, 1986). According to the NSSE data Kuh and his colleagues (2001) analyzed, approximately 40 percent of commuter students who drove to campus spent at least six hours a week caring for dependents. This percentage was substantially less for those who walked to campus (22 percent of first-year students and 10 percent of seniors), but was ten times greater than students who lived on campus. Upholding these expectations has been found to have negative consequences on commuter students' ability to connect with other students (Pokorny et al., 2017).

Travel. By virtue of living off campus, it is necessary for commuter students to spend time traveling to their college or university, which can comprise a significant amount of time throughout their week. Gefen and Fish's (2013) study of first-year commuter students at two urban institutions, for example, found that over a third spent six to 10 hours a week traveling, which mirrored the amount of time the participants in Clay's (2016) study of involved commuter spent traveling. The one-way travel time for his participants was 20 to 50 minutes, with most living 25 to 35 minutes away. His participants, however, traveled to campus up to six days a week due to their involvement activities. Further, the need to travel can come with a host of additional

challenges such as car troubles, traffic, delays in public transportation, and finding parking once on campus (Banning & Hughes, 1986; Clay, 2016; Weiss, 2014).

Stress. While stress is not unique to students who commute, the complexity of commuters' lives can add to their stress levels. For example, while Alfano and Eduljee (2013) did not find a statistically significant difference between the amount of time that commuter and residential students worked, they did find that those commuter students who worked felt more stress than those residential students who worked, which suggests that other aspects of their lives may contribute to this stress. For example, commuter students can have complicated and fluctuating living experiences (Weiss, 2014), which in turn can affect their stress levels, adjustment to college (Gefen & Fish, 2013), and even their persistence (Ishitani & Reid, 2015). Traveling from home to campus can add stress because of traffic, car problems, parking, and the need for commuter students to prepare everything they need in advance before they leave home, since going back and forth between campus during the day is an unlikely possibility. For some commuter students, however, the consequences of these stresses are preferable to the cost, living arrangement options, and perceived experience associated with living on campus (Weiss).

Academic Outcomes

One misconception about commuter students is that they are lazy and academically unmotivated (Jacoby, 2000b). Research, however, suggests that they are as similarly engaged academically (Graham et al., 2018; Kuh et al., 2001), and persist at similar rates as their residential peers (Ishitani & Reid, 2015). This section explores

both of these outcomes – academic engagement and persistence – as they relate to commuter students in more depth.

Academic Engagement. Two large national studies have examined commuter students' academic engagement as measured by the National Survey of Student Engagement by comparing differences in residential student scores with walking and driving (i.e., those who lived farther away than walking distance) commuter students' scores. For the most part, both studies found that living on campus was associated with significantly higher engagement scores, and living within walking distance had less of an effect than on those who lived farther away (Graham et al., 2018; Kuh et al., 2001). There were a few exceptions, however, that deviated from this generalization. Kuh and his colleagues (2001) found no significant difference in general education outcomes gains (ex. speaking, writing, and analytical skills) between first-year residential and commuter students, and only a significant difference in practical competence gains (ex. technology, quantitative, and work-related skills) between residential students and driving commuter students. The difference in practical competence gains, however, disappeared by the senior year. Graham and her team (2018), who studied the effect of where first-year students lived (residential, walking, farther than walking) on NSSE scores, found no significant difference in effect on time spent preparing for class between residential students and commuters who walked to campus. They even found that living within walking distance had a significantly positive effect on student-faculty interactions and perceived benefits from co-curricular activities.

Even where there were differences, the effect sizes were either small or very small ($r < .20$). Again, however, there were exceptions, especially between residential students and those students who drove to campus. Driving had a large negative effect on enriching educational experiences (e.g., discussions with students from diverse backgrounds, internships, community service, co-curricular activities) for first-year students and seniors (Kuh et al., 2001), a small negative effect on student-faculty interactions for FY (Graham et al.), medium negative effect for seniors (Kuh et al.), and small-to-medium negative effect on collaborative learning (e.g., working with other students) for first-year students (Graham et al.).

Persistence. Commuter students tend to persist from the first-to-second year at similar rates as residential students (Gianoutsos & Rosser, 2014; Ishitani & Reid, 2015). Ishitani and Reid's national study of over 7,500 students found, however, that students who lived at home with parents were 23 percent more likely to leave their institution than residential students. They also found that academic and social integration contributed to first-year persistence, which aligns with Tinto's (1975, 1987) classic student retention model. It should be noted that significance of social integration was tested at the $p < .10$ level, which Ishitani and Reid themselves described as being "rather liberal" (p. 22).

Prior to the current literature on commuter student involvement (i.e., Clay, 2016; Dugan et al., 2008; Krause, 2007; Manley Lima, 2014; Yearwood & Jones, 2012), Braxton, Hirschy, and McLendon (2004) challenged the applicability of Tinto's (1975, 1987) model to primarily commuter institutions. They argued that while social connections were important for commuter students, social integration would not

predict persistence. Subsequent testing of the model found that persistence for commuter students was directly influenced by institutional commitment, and indirectly influenced by academic and intellectual development, and perceptions of institutional integrity and commitment to student welfare. The model, which did not include social integration, ended up not fully predicting persistence (Braxton, Doyle, Hartley, Hirschy, Jones, & McLendon, 2014), suggesting that, like in Ishitani and Reid's (2015) study, social integration is an important factor in commuter student persistence.

Involvement

Alexander Astin defined *involvement* as "the amount of physical and psychological energy that [a] student devotes to the academic experience" (Astin, 1984/1999, p. 518). The "academic experience," according to Astin, includes direct academic tasks, such as studying, and co-curricular tasks, such as participation in student organizations, including Greek-letter organizations. This definition of involvement has both quantitative and qualitative elements. It is quantitative in terms of the amount of time spent on a task, and qualitative due to the nature of how a student is engaged with the task at hand. The degree to which a student is involved at college varies from student-to-student (Astin), and while he argued that commuting can be detrimental to involvement (Astin, 1993), more recent research suggests that commuter students are interested in being involved co-curricularly (Alfano & Eduljee, 2013; Clay, 2016; Weiss), and benefit from the experience (Clay; Dugan et al., 2008; Ishitani & Reid, 2015; Krause, 2007; Manley Lima, 2014; Yearwood & Jones, 2012).

Alfano and Eduljee (2013), for example, found that half of the commuter students surveyed at the institution they studied were interested in greater levels of involvement. Commuter students, however, can be judicious in the co-curricular tasks in which they become involved, and prefer to participate in activities that they find to be meaningful and have a positive impact on their future careers. They also may wait until they are able to balance their classes with their other responsibilities before seeking to add co-curricular activities to their schedules (Clay, 2016). Interestingly, Weiss (2014) found that the concept of "involvement" was so closely tied to the residential experience that even when commuter students held on-campus jobs, participated in organizations and campus programs, and made new friends at their institution, they did not consider themselves to be involved *because* they were commuter students.

In addition to simply being interested in involvement, commuter students benefit from being involved as well. One way that involvement helps is with commuter students' social integration (Krause, 2007), which in turn positively influences with their first-year persistence (Ishitani & Reid, 2015). Additionally, involvement helps with commuter students' leadership development (Clay, 2016; Dugan et al., 2008), time management, career development (Clay), and sense of belonging (Manley Lima, 2014). Involvement has also been associated with academic outcomes. Yearwood and Jones (2012), however, found that the degree of involvement, as Astin (1984/1999) posited, mattered. They found that commuter students who participated in co-curricular activities for at least 16 hours per week

spent more time interacting with faculty and reported greater academic effort than those who participated in co-curricular activities for 15 or fewer hours per week.

Even though commuter students are interested and benefit from involvement, their challenges may present barriers to engaging in co-curricular activities. To begin, the need to work can inhibit involvement for monetary reasons. As previously noted, commuter students work primarily to pay bills, rent, and tuition (Alfano & Eduljee, 2013), therefore involvement opportunities that require discretionary funds such as concerts, campus events, and Greek-letter organizations may not even be a viable option for commuter students because they must meet their other fiscal responsibilities. Travel can also be challenging because commuter students are uninterested, unable (Kirk & Lewis, 2015), or strained by returning to campus for co-curricular activities once they have already left campus. Finally, between traveling to and from campus, coursework, employment, and taking care of dependents, time for commuter students is at a premium (Burlison, 2015; Clay, 2016; Jacoby, 2000b; Kirk & Lewis; Weiss, 2014).

Involvement opportunities should, again, be meaningful (Clay, 2016) and scheduled at times that work for students (Jacoby, 2000a; Weiss, 2014). It should be noted, however, that some participants in Weiss' study had quite a bit of free time in between classes. That time was used for homework, napping (primarily in their cars), running errands, eating, or catching up with friends, rather than participating in activities. Participants in other studies with commuter students have found that it may take extra motivation on an individual's part to engage in co-curricular activities (Clay, 2016; Kirk & Lewis, 2015). Even so, if involvement opportunities are not

considered worthwhile and structured in such a way that supports commuter student participation then they may not participate at all. Kirk and Lewis summed this idea up poignantly when they wrote:

> Their (commuter students') response to these barriers was often to remain uninvolved, leading many to view the college campus not as a place to connect, but as another location in which they received a service, comparable with the grocery store or beauty salon. (p. 56)

Sense of Belonging

Much of the literature on college student sense of belonging examines the experiences of "minority" student groups such as Latinx students (e.g., Maestas, Vaquera, & Zehr, 2007), Black students (e.g., Strayhorn, 2012), and sexual minority students (Vaccaro & Newman, 2017). Harper (2013) asserted the use of the term *minoritized* over "minority" to emphasize the social construction and shifting nature of "minority" status. His argument is that a person is not born a minority, nor are they a minority in all settings, rather "they are rendered minorities in particular situations and institutional environments" (p. 207). While Harper was referring specifically to race, I argue that due to higher education's emphasis on the residential student experience (Attewell & Lavin, 2012; Jacoby, 2015), commuter students become minoritized in many educational settings as well, including primarily commuter campuses, when those institutions do not attend to their needs (Weiss, 2014). Therefore, belonging is an appropriate lens through which the commuter student experiences can be examined.

Indeed, for over 30 years, researchers have made the call for institutions to help commuter students develop a sense of belonging (Jacoby, 2000b; Manley Lima, 2014; Wilmes & Quade, 1986). Involvement helps to develop a sense of belonging for commuter students (Manley Lima), just as it does for residential ones (Johnson et al., 2007). Manley Lima, whose dissertation included over 700 commuter students at four institutions focused on the relationship between commuter student involvement and sense of belonging, found a weak but significant relationship between the two. An even stronger predictor than involvement activities on sense of belonging were relationships with administrators, administrative offices, and faculty. While her research found that relationships with other students and student organizations had the weakest influence on sense of belonging, other research points to the importance of commuter students finding other students "like them" (Gefen & Fish, 2013; Pokorny et al., 2017), which can aid with developing a sense of belonging (e.g., Strayhorn, 2012). Even so, Jacoby (2000b) cited Maslow's (1970) hierarchy of needs when she argued that institutional structures have to support commuter students' basic needs before they are able to feel like they belong and reach higher levels of self-actualization.

Section Summary

This section outlined the literature that pertains to commuter students. As the research suggests, commuter students are similar to their residential counterparts in some ways, but in other ways are quite different, and, indeed, face some challenges that are unique to many "traditional" undergraduate students. Even so, commuter students have the interest, and right, to engage on campus co-curricularly through

involvement activities. It is the responsibility of higher education institutions to develop the structures necessary to help all students, including commuter students, to support involvement (Astin, 1985/1999) and develop a sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2012, 2019). The next section of this chapter will discuss the pertinent literature to one form of involvement – membership in Greek-letter organizations.

Greek-Letter Organization Membership

Phi Beta Kappa, the first American Greek-letter organization, was founded at the College of William and Mary in 1776 (Owen, 1991). The members met regularly in a room at a tavern in Williamsburg, Virginia to discuss and debate classroom teachings out of sight from their professors (Thelin, 2011). Reflective of higher education of the time, however, only men were allowed to join. As the number of women grew on college campuses in the 1800s, they began to form their own Greek-lettered organizations. Their academic purposes were similar, but as a minoritized group of students on campus, their organizations also served as a place of support (Turk, 2004). Over time, the number of Greek-letter organizations proliferated across the country, and many eventually shifted their emphasis to become more social in nature, which is what we see today (Owen). This section will review the literature about the experiences and outcomes associated with membership in Greek-letter organizations, and includes a special emphasis on commuter students and sense of belonging, which are two foci of this study.

Membership Experiences

Greek-letter organization membership is not a monolithic experience. Membership is influenced by a variety of structural factors and differs by

organizational type, institution, and chapter. The first two parts of this section will review some of those differences, and then provide more detail about experiences that directly relate to this study: commuter students in Greek-letter organizations, and the connection between membership and sense of belonging.

Organizational Type. Most broadly, Greek-letter organizations are generally considered to be either historically White or culturally-based organizations. Just as the structural misogyny of fraternities led women to organize as sororities (Turk, 2004), the structural racism that excluded students of color, among other minoritized groups, led to the organization of Greek-letter organizations around various identities. The majority of the first cultural groups to form in the early twentieth century were organized by Black and Jewish students who were excluded from the White protestant-oriented organizations of the time. The number and diversity of fraternal organizations grew throughout the 1900s with founding of Greek-letter organizations that center around Asian-, Latinx-, Gay- and Lesbian-, and Native American-identifying students (Torbenson, 2009).

Besides simply organizing around a specific identity, culturally-based Greek-letter organizations include an element of exploration and support for members and non-members who share the organization's identity or identities. This emphasis and accompanying programming differs from historically White Greek-letter organizations, which now are primarily concerned with the social aspect of the experience. Culturally-based organizations also tend to have smaller chapter sizes than historically White organizations. Their size leads them to operate with smaller budgets, and increases their need to collaborate with other organizations to host events

(Garcia, 2019; Ray, 2013). Further, culturally-based organizations tend to implement more open, as opposed to structured, recruitment processes (Salinas, Gillon, & Camacho, 2019). Since they are not bound by specific national recruitment mandates and quotas, they are able to strive for selecting only a few of the very best students to join (Parks & Brown, 2005).

The differences between historically White and culturally-based groups are not only prevalent at the organizational level, but at the institutional level as well. Ray (2013) found that the members of the culturally-based organizations he interviewed had different experiences from the members of the historically White organizations he interviewed from the same campus. Many of the differences were related to the factors identified above (size, budgets, etc.), but also found the culturally-based organizations did not have housing on campus like many of the historically White chapters. Therefore, they relied on institutionally-controlled spaces to hold events which resulted in a greater level of oversight on events and scrutiny in terms of adhering to policy. Both Ray and Garcia (2019) found that the historically White and culturally-based groups operated with little interaction on campus, and while the culturally-based organizations tried to collaborate with the historically White organizations, they were rarely interested. They also both found that the members of historically White organizations had very little knowledge of the cultural Greek-letter organizations that existed on their own campuses.

Between- and Within-Institutional Differences. College environment theory suggests that the various college and university characteristics influences the student experience (Strange & Banning, 2001, 2015). For example, research has found that

institutional selectivity is positively associated with the proportion of students who are members of a Greek-letter organization (Hamilton & Cheng, 2018) and has a positive effect on leadership skills (Hevel, Martin, Goodman, & Pascarella, 2018). While membership is a positive predictor for interactions with faculty and students from different backgrounds when compared with unaffiliated students, institutional selectivity reduces the effects of these outcomes (Hayek, Carini, O'Day & Kuh, 2002). In terms of institutional control (i.e., public or private), public institutions were more likely to have housing for Greek-letter organizations, especially if they were selective (Hamilton & Cheng), and members at public institutions spent more time engaging in co-curricular activities and preparing for class, and were more engaged in community service than non-members (Hayek et al.). Regarding institutional size by undergraduate enrollment, attending a medium or large institution has been found to have a positive effect on fraternity members' leadership abilities (Dowiak, 2016). Finally, in a study that included men from four public institutions, one team of researchers found institutional differences in terms of attitudes toward hazing, and suggested that fraternity community cultures that were supportive of hazing predicted individual member attitudes toward the acceptability of these practices and whether or not a student would report hazing (McCreary, Bray, & Thoma, 2016).

In addition to differences between institutions, there are differences between the chapters at the same institution as well. As already noted above, members of historically White and culturally-based organizations can have different experiences at the same institution (Garcia, 2019; Ray, 2013). DeSantis' (2007) also examined the experiences of fraternity and sorority members on the same campus, although it is

unclear, if any of the chapters were culturally-based organizations. While his work focused on gender, he also found that chapters on the campus he studied divided into three tiers. The "elite" tier of fraternities and sororities were the largest, wealthiest, most well-known among students and administration, and had the most influential alumni. Their membership included the students from middle- and upper-class families who were perceived to be the most popular and attractive. Further, their members were primarily White, straight students, who held traditional masculine and feminine views. The "aspiring" organizations were less selective, less wealthy, and had less influence than the elite organizations. While they were less homogenous than the top tier, DeSantis argued it was "not because [the members] were more self-actualized and enlightened…but they were forced, by university-imposed quotas and their own financial exigencies, to be less selective when recruiting" (p. 12). Finally, the "struggler" third-tier organizations (which happened to be 15 of the 34 fraternities and sororities at the institution under study), were generally the newest, smallest, least wealthy and influential, and did not participate in community-wide activities. They were, however, the most diverse groups on campus. According to DeSantis, many of the elite and aspiring organizations did not know much about the organizations in this last tier, if they knew about them at all. Even so, the members in these groups reported to be happy in their organizations and made connections with their fellow members.

Similarly, Jabs (2018) found that there were differences between sorority women's experiences based on chapter size. She found that members of the smaller chapters felt like they were able to know one another better, whereas those from larger chapters described an experience that revolved around multiple smaller groups within

the organization. Members from smaller chapters also felt like they had a better opportunity to obtain leadership positions. However, her participants reported that some of the benefits of being in a larger chapter were their presence on campus and ability to execute large-scale programs. Due to the sheer size of larger chapters (one of her participants came from a chapter with approximately 400 women), others on campus knew them. Similarly, because there were so many members to divide the work, they were able to put on larger events without overtaxing the membership.

Commuter Students in Greek-Letter Organizations. An extremely limited body of work has examined the experience of commuter students in Greek-letter organizations. The topic was first addressed by Dr. Debbie Heida (1986) who described Greek-letter organizations at primarily commuter institutions as non-stereotypical due to their small, diverse chapters that lacked a living facility. According to Heida, these chapters struggled with recruitment and their members tried to mimic the chapters at more residential campuses. Since they had a different experience than the one they considered to be "traditional," however, the members at primarily commuter institutions had a hard time feeling like "real" Greek-letter organization members.

More recently, four quantitative empirical studies have examined the outcomes of fraternities and sororities at primarily commuter institutions. Biddix, Singer, and Aslinger (2018) compared first-year persistence of women who affiliated with historically White sororities with those who did not affiliate across 16 campuses. They found that membership in a sorority was significantly and positively associated with first-year persistence. Further, they found no significant difference in persistence for

sorority women when they compared residential and primarily commuter institutions. A follow-up study found that the sorority women were more likely to graduate in four or five years than their unaffiliated peers. While there was no difference in graduation rates between primarily commuter and residential institutions at the five-year mark, the women from residential institutions were more likely to graduate in four years when compared to primarily commuter institutions (Biddix, Singer, Bureau, Nicholson, & Ishitani, 2019). Even so, it is unclear how many of the participants in either study at the primarily commuter institutions were commuters, if any at all. Yearwood and Jones' (2012) study, however, included exclusively commuter students from one urban institution. They found that successful (i.e., seniors with at least a C-average) Black students who were involved in a fraternity or sorority were more academically engaged and perceived a more supportive campus environment than unaffiliated students.

Vetter's (2011) single-institutional study on membership outcomes included commute distance as a variable, and found somewhat more complex results. He found no difference in scores on academic and personal success, as measured by student thriving, based on where and with whom members lived. He did find, however, that membership was significantly correlated with social connectedness for those who lived on campus and within a mile from campus. While still significant, the social connectedness scores were lower for members who lived within a mile than the residential members. Membership was also negatively correlated with classroom engagement for residential students and those who lived within a mile from campus, with more pronounced findings for the latter group. Interestingly, engaged learning

was positively correlated, although not significantly so, for members who lived more than a mile away from campus. Similarly, Vetter found that membership was positively correlated with academic determination for those members who lived more than a mile away.

Membership and Sense of Belonging. Fraternity men and sorority women conceptualize belonging as part of the experience of brotherhood (McCreary & Schutts, 2015) and sisterhood (Cohen, McCreary, & Schutts, 2017), respectively. The feeling of belonging associated with membership, however, is not limited to the chapter experience. One study found that joining a fraternity or sorority chapter assisted with one's connection to the campus Greek-letter organization community as well as with the institution as a whole (Matthews, Featherstone, Bluder, Gerling, Loge, & Messenger, 2009). Further, the relationships can be qualitatively different from other peer relationships college students develop. The sorority women in Wessel and Salisbury's (2017) study described the relationships they had with their sorority sisters to be "deeper and more meaningful" (p. 26) than those they had with people in their residence halls.

As in the greater body of literature on college student sense of belonging, scholars have paid specific attention to belonging for minoritized students who join Greek-letter organizations. For example, joining a fraternity or sorority has been found to increase sense of belonging for Latinx students (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Maestas et al., 2007). While the findings from these studies are unclear as to whether or not the fraternities or sororities which participants joined were Latinx-interest organizations, other studies have found that Latinx students who join Latinx-interest fraternities and

sororities yielded some of the benefits associated with belonging, such as a smooth transition to college and identity development (Guardia & Evans, 2008; Orta, Murguira, & Cruz, 2019). Similarly, other work has connected belonging and membership in an identity-based Greek-letter organization for Asian American students (Chen, 2009; Tran & Chang, 2013), Black men (Strayhorn, 2012), deaf women (Stapleton & Nicolazzo, 2019), Gay men (Yeung, 2009), and racially minoritized students in general (Johnson & Larabee, 2003).

Belonging, however, is not equally achieved by all members. In general, belonging can vary between members (McCreary & Schutts, 2015; Schutts, McCreary, & Cohen, 2017). Specifically, chapter officers have been found to report a statistically greater sense of belonging than general members (Long & Snowden, 2011). This could be related to the time spent with the organizations due to their positions, but interestingly, too much time being involved can actually reduce belonging (Strayhorn, 2012). In terms of social identities, straight men in fraternities have been found to report higher levels of belonging than their Gay or Bisexual brothers (Long, 2010). While corollary studies have not compared belonging between straight and Lesbian or Bisexual sorority women, Neumann, Kretovics, and Roccoforte (2013) found that sorority women at one institution were accepting of Lesbian and Bisexual women as long as they conformed to typical gender norms. That expectation could have a negative effect on belonging due to inhibited personal acceptance (Vaccaro & Newman, 2017). Socioeconomically, students who are unable to pay the extra costs associated with membership may feel a reduced sense of belonging if that inability inhibits them from having the same experience as their chapter brothers and sisters

(Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013; McClure & Ryder, 2018). Members' sense of belonging within the Greek-letter organization community may also be affected by historically White chapter members' racial biases toward culturally-based chapter members, and structural inequities between the two groups (Garcia, 2019; Ray, 2013). Further, struggling chapters that lack the members, social connections, and resources to be one of the top chapters on a campus may feel out of place within the community (DeSantis, 2007).

Membership Outcomes

Literature reviews on college student outcomes over the past twenty-five years have yielded mixed results for those students who join Greek-letter organizations (Biddix et al., 2014; Mayhew et al., 2016; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). This section is divided into four parts, each of which highlights one broad category of outcomes. The first part reviews the outcomes related to academics, the second to persistence, and the third to non-academic, although still important, outcomes. Finally, the last part will review some of the negative aspects that can be associated with Greek-letter organization membership.

Academic Outcomes. Academics is one of the values generally espoused by Greek-letter organizations (Matthews et al., 2009). The findings about college GPAs, however, have been mixed. One national study found that members achieve higher first-year GPAs overall than unaffiliated students (DeBard & Sacks, 2011). Another national study found that sorority women have significantly higher, and fraternity men have significantly lower, first-year GPAs than their unaffiliated peers, but that the significance disappears over time (Bowman & Holmes, 2017). A third national study,

however, found a non-significant difference in GPA between affiliated and unaffiliated women only, with fraternity men having a significantly lower GPA by 0.5 points than unaffiliated men (Routon & Walker, 2014).

Other studies have found that members are comparably or more academically engaged than non-members according to NSSE scores (Bureau, Ryan, Ahren, Shoup, & Torres, 2011; Hayek et al., 2002; Pike, 2003). While some of the studies described above found a significant difference in GPA between fraternity men and sorority women, Pike found no significant difference in academic engagement between the two groups. Further, the differences in scores were more pronounced for seniors than first-year students, which suggests, at least according to these findings, that membership has a stronger effect over time.

Persistence. Prominent models of college student retention have pointed to the importance of social connections as part of student persistence (Bean, 1980, 1985; Berger & Milem, 1999; Tinto, 1975, 1987). Therefore, it is no surprise that the connection between Greek-letter organizations, as primarily social organizations, and persistence, has received much attention. The literature is quite clear that first-year fraternity and sorority members persist at higher rates to their second year than unaffiliated students (Biddix et al., 2018; Bowman & Holmes, 2017; DeBard & Sacks, 2011). Women who join in their first year of college are also more likely to graduate in four years (Bowman & Holmes; Routon & Walker, 2014) and six or fewer years (Biddix et al., 2019) than unaffiliated women. While the same does not hold true for men who join in their first year according to Bowman and Holmes' study, Routon and Walker, who considered the impact of men joining a fraternity at any point prior to

graduation, find that fraternity men are more likely to graduate in four years than those who did not join a fraternity. Of course, a limitation of measuring membership through surveys distributed to seniors is that those who joined a fraternity and left the institution prior to their fourth year are not included.

There are nuanced conflicting findings about sorority membership and first-year persistence, however. DeBard and Sacks (2011) found a significant difference in persistence only for women who joined in the spring semester, meaning there was no difference in persistence between unaffiliated women and those who joined sororities in their first fall semester. Meanwhile, Biddix and his colleagues (2018), who only studied women who joined in the fall, did find a significant difference in persistence. A possible explanation of the discrepancy could be that DeBard and Sacks' study included *all* sorority types, including those, like culturally-based organizations, which do not initiate first-semester students, whereas Biddix and his colleagues' study included women from historically White sororities that fall under the purview of the National Panhellenic Conference, an organization that encourages recruitment to occur as early as possible in a student's career (National Panhellenic Conference, 2020).

Non-Academic Outcomes. Researchers have also explored the effects of membership on other types of outcomes. For example, students who join fraternities and sororities tend to be more satisfied with their college experience (Bowman & Holmes, 2017; Bureau et al., 2011; Hayek et al., 2002), and feel that they are more supported than unaffiliated students (Bureau et al.; Hayek et al.; Yearwood & Jones, 2012). Interestingly, even though fraternity and sorority members are more satisfied and feel more supported than there unaffiliated peers, membership still does not

predict a significant difference on psychological well-being (Martin, Hevel, Asel, & Pascarella, 2011).

Fraternity and sorority members also tend to be more involved in the co-curricular experience than unaffiliated peers (Bureau et al., 2011; Pike, 2000), including spending more time doing community service than unaffiliated students (Hayek et al., 2002). While it is unclear whether or not the involvement is inclusive of the time they spent doing worked associated with their chapters, members do benefit from their experiences. For example, members report greater gains in personal and social development than non-members (Bureau et al.; Hayek et al.; Pike, 2000, 2003). Membership has also assists with the development of students' racial, ethnic (Chen, 2009; Guardia & Evans, 2008; Orta et al., 2019; Taylor & Howard-Hamilton, 1995; Tran & Chang, 2013) and leadership (Komives, Owen, Longerbeam, Mainella, & Osteen, 2005) identities. Regarding the latter, membership has also been associated with leadership ability in general (Dowiak, 2016; Hevel et al., 2018; Long & Snowden, 2011; Martin, Hevel, & Pascarella, 2012).

Negative Outcomes. In addition to the positive outcomes associated with membership in Greek-letter organizations, a number of negative ones exist as well. For example, research has found that fraternity and sorority members exhibit homophobic (Case, Hesp, & Eberly, 2005; DeSantis & Coleman, 2013; Neumann et al., 2013; Rankin, Hesp, & Weber, 2013), racist (Gillon, Beatty, & Salinas, 2019; Syrett, 2009), sexist (Ray & Rosow, 2010; Rhoads, 1995; Sasso, 2015), and elitist behaviors (Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013; Matthews et al., 2009). While each of these

could be explored in depth, I will focus on excessive alcohol consumption, hazing, and sexual violence.

Wechsler, Kuh, and Davenport's (1996) study comparing Greek-letter organization members' attitudes toward, self-reported behaviors about, and results from, drinking found that affiliated students placed a greater premium on drinking and partying, were more likely to drink, and have greater consequences from drinking then non-members. Further, those members who lived in Greek-letter organization houses were significantly more likely to binge drink and place an emphasis on binge drinking than the members who did not live in houses, and the men who lived in houses placed a significantly higher emphasis on parties than those who did not live in houses. Biddix and his colleagues (2014) used that study as a starting place to begin their literature review of the research on Greek-letter organizations between 1996 and 2013, and found the majority of the literature focused on members' alcohol usage, which highlights the pervasiveness of the problem in Greek-letter organizations. More recent research has even suggested that students' history of drinking in high school are more likely to join fraternities than those who did not drink prior to college (Bowman & Holmes, 2017; Routon & Walker, 2014).

Excessive drinking spills over to into hazing practices as well (Allan, Kerschner, & Payne, 2019; Allan & Madden, 2008; Campo, Poulos, & Sipple, 2005). While hazing illegal in most states, it has long been associated with the process of joining a Greek-letter organization (Newman, 1999; Parks, 2017). These practices typically consists of physical and psychological abuse (Allan et al., 2019; Allan & Madden; Ellsworth, 2006), that generally gets more intense over the course of the new

member period (Cimino, 2018). One challenge with hazing is that most students come into college having experienced hazing in high school, but do not identify it as a such, and therefore have normalized these behaviors as part of joining a group (Allan & Madden).

In addition to excessive drinking and hazing, sexual violence is a third major negative experience associated with Greek-letter organizations. Sexual violence can include unwanted touching, attempted rape, rape or other unwanted sexual activities, and affects people of all genders (Mellins et al., 2017), including members of both sororities and fraternities (Canan, Jozkowski, & Crawford, 2018). Studies have found that sorority women are more likely to experience sexual violence than other women (Mellins et al.; Mohler-Kuo, Dowdall, Koss, & Weschler, 2004), even when controlling for alcohol consumption (Mino & Einolf, 2009). In other words, as Minow and Einolf suggested, there was something else besides the sorority experience that was associated with sexual assault, specifically rape, other than being in situations in which alcohol was being consumed.

One potential explanation is the acceptance of rape myths among Greek-letter organization members, such as victim blaming and absolution of the perpetrator. While both sorority women (Ortiz & Thompson, 2017) and fraternity men are accepting of rape myths, fraternity men have been found to believe them more strongly (Bannon, Brosi, & Foubert, 2013; Canan et al., 2018). Canan and her colleagues suggested that one explanation could be due to the “traditional” gender roles to which fraternity men and sorority women are expected to conform, including being subservient to men (DeSantis, 2007). Even so, fraternities are typically the

organizations in control of many aspects within high-risk situations in which students could experience sexual violence (i.e., parties). Since national sorority policies forbid them from hosting events involving alcohol on their properties, these events are often held at fraternity houses on- and off-campus where they manage attendance, who is allowed to drink, and what drinks are served (Armstrong, Hamilton, & Sweeney, 2006). Further, not only are students with a history of drinking more likely to join fraternities (Bowman & Holmes, 2017; Routon & Walker, 2014), incoming students who have a stronger disposition toward getting away with sexual violence are more likely to join fraternities (Palmer, McMahon, & Fissel, 2020).

As previously identified, the Greek-letter organization experience can vary greatly. Indeed, research has followed this trend for alcohol usage (Reis & Trockel, 2003), acceptance of hazing (McCready, 2019), and attitudes toward sexual assault (Harris & Harper, 2014). Further, interventions for each of these areas have been found to reduce drinking (Simo, 2011), increase awareness about hazing and reduce inclinations in taking part in it (Center for Digital Education, 2018), improve the normalization of consent for fraternity men (Colon, 2016), and increased bystander intervention efficacy for sorority women (Moynihan, Banyard, Arnold, Eckstein, & Stapleton, 2011).

Section Summary

Greek-lettered organizations have been a staple in American higher education for well over two centuries. They have evolved over time into different types and now occupy many different campuses, which shape students' membership experiences. While there are many positive outcomes associated with membership, a number of

negative outcomes exist as well. Throughout the 1990s and into the twenty-first century, much of the research on Greek-letter organizations focused on the negative aspects of the experience. This finding led Molasso (2005) to assert in the inaugural issue of *Oracle: The Research Journal of the Association of Fraternity/Sorority Advisors* that research needs to expand beyond the negative aspects of membership in order to gain a greater understanding of the complete membership experience. The main purpose of this study is to dive into one of those experiences – the experience of commuter students in Greek-letter organizations at primarily commuter institutions. This will be done using sense of belonging as a lens, which was covered briefly here, but will be discussed more broadly and thoroughly in the next section of this chapter.

Sense of Belonging

Belonging is a complex phenomenon. To begin, there are varying definitions about that it means to "belong." Some definitions emphasize the extent to which an individual is valued (e.g., Strayhorn, 2012) while others focus on the "fit" one achieves within an institution (e.g., Bean, 1985). Students and institutions strive to develop belonging, but it is not simply achieved. The extent to which one feels like they belong changes over time (Bowman, Jarratt, Jang, & Bono, 2019; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Hausmann, Ye, Schofield, & Woods, 2009; Means & Pyne, 2017), may be experienced only in certain locations within an institution (Freeman, Anderman, & Jensen, 2007; Tachine, Cabrera, & Yellow Bird, 2017), and in some cases may be experienced at the individual and group levels differently (Vaccaro & Newman, 2017). This section of the chapter will explore the literature as it pertains to the varying

definitions of belonging, the outcomes associated with it, and the experiences that contribute to and detract from belonging.

Definitions

Scholars have defined "belonging" in a number of different ways. Baumeister and Leary (1995), for example, described belonging as "lasting, positive, and significant interpersonal relationships…[that involve] frequent affectively pleasant interactions with a few other people…in the context of a temporally stable and enduring framework of affective concern for each other's welfare" (p. 497). Strayhorn (2012), drawing from Maslow's (1970) hierarchy of needs, also related belonging and concern for others. He defined it as a "basic human need…[that] develops in response to the degree to which an individual feels respected, valued, accepted, and needed by a defined group" (Strayhorn, 2012, p. 87). Also focusing on the social and personal value dimensions of belonging, Goodenow (1993) described it as "the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the school social environment" (p. 80). Tinto's (1975, 1987) conceptualization of belonging went beyond solely the social integration to include academic integration as well, which Bean (1980, 1985) refined to include the psychological aspects of integration, including the extent to which a student feels like they "fit" at their college or university (Bean, 1985). Hurtado and Carter (1997) and Hausmann, Ye, Schofield, and Woods (2009) also differentiated between the behavioral and psychological aspects of integration as part of belonging, or in other words, the experiences in which a student engages to increase belonging during and following their transition to college, and the actual feeling of belonging they develop, are separate experiences.

While these definitions differ, they have a few elements in common. The first they are all, at least in part, social in nature. One does not feel belonging in a vacuum; it is dependent upon interactions, specifically positive interactions, with others. Second, words like "degree," "extent," and "significant" suggest that belonging is not a binary, but rather occurs along a continuum. Finally, the environment in which a person is located influences belonging. Most definitions are restrictive to the educational institution environment (Bean 1980, 1985; Goodenow, 1993; Hausmann et al., 2009; Tinto, 1975,1987). Baumeister and Leary (1995), however, take a more general approach and refer to belonging as occurring among groups of people regardless of the environment. Still others (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Strayhorn, 2012, 2019) blur the lines between belonging occurring at an institution and within a specific group.

Outcomes

The extent to which students develop a sense of belonging affects the student experience early in their collegiate careers. Hausmann, Schofield, and Woods' (2007) single-campus study on students' intention to persist found that focusing on first-year students' belonging at the beginning of the year predicted students' institutional commitment and intention to persist at the institution even when students' sense of belonging fluctuated throughout the year. Similarly, Hurtado and Carter's (1997) national study of Latinx students found that sense of belonging also assisted with their transition to college. This finding, taken with Johnson and her colleagues' (2007) finding that a smooth transition to college predicts sense of belonging suggests that transitioning and developing a sense of belonging are mutually reinforcing.

In addition to assistance with transitioning to college, developing a sense of belonging is associated with persistence. Tinto (1975, 1987) theorized that belonging came from social and academic integration, which was necessary for students to achieve in order to remain at their institution. Bean (1985), in his refined model, however, found that it was not social and academic integration itself that predicted persistence, but rather the extent to which a student felt like they fit in, which remained a significant predictor for his participants throughout their undergraduate career. This psychological element of belonging as it relates to retention is supported by other studies that have found that connections with peers and faculty aids with persistence (Hausmann et al., 2009; Strayhorn, Blakewood, & DeVita, 2008).

A third significant outcome from developing a sense of belonging is self-actualization. In Maslow's (1970) work on human motivation, belonging occurs as an intermediary step between basic needs such as food and shelter being met, and higher-level needs such as self-esteem and self-actualization, or a conceptualization of about who one is and can become. Strayhorn (2012, 2019) applied Maslow's model to the college context, and argued that the various environments in which students interact with others at college shape the extent to which they feel like they belong, and therefore, are able to move to a self-actualization stage. For example, Means and Pyne's (2017) found that when low-income, first-generation, first-year students of color developed a sense of belonging through participation in multicultural center and cultural organization programming, their racial identity also developed. Similarly, participation in Latina sororities can help Latina women explore and embrace their ethnic identities (Orta et al., 2019). In the classroom setting, Freeman, Anderman, and

Jensen (2007) found that developing a sense of belonging helped with students' self-efficacy and intrinsic motivation.

Contributors to Belonging

Both social and academic experiences influence belonging. Primarily, it is the positive connections that students make with their peers, faculty, staff, and administrators that lead to a sense of belonging at college. This section will review three areas that contribute to belonging: student organization participation, interacting with diverse students and finding other students "like them," and academic experiences.

Student Organizations. In addition to the research on sense of belonging and Greek-letter organization membership, other research has examined the connection between student organizations generally and sense of belonging. Bowman, Jarratt, Jang, and Bono's (2019) single-institution study of first-semester first-year students found that participating in a student organization at least five hours a week predicts belonging. An interesting nuance to their findings, however, is that social connectedness more strongly predicts belonging than time spent in the organization, which suggests that significant engagement with the organization may lead to the interpersonal connections necessary to positively influence belonging. Strayhorn's (2012) analysis of 8,000 student responses on the College Student Experience Questionnaire had similar results. He found that those students who were members of student organizations, felt a stronger sense of belonging than those students who were not, with an increased level of belonging for those who "often" or "very often" participated in these activities. Commuter students, however, may benefit more in

terms of belonging due to the relationships with faculty and staff as members of student organizations than from the peer relationships with other members. Even so, those peer relationships still predict belonging, albeit at a weaker level (Manley Lima, 2014).

Other studies have considered student organizations and belonging for racially minoritized groups. Hurtado and Carter's (1997) national study of Latinx students found that membership in social, community, religious, and fraternal organizations assisted with Latinx students' belonging. Extending their work, Johnson et al. (2007) found similar results for Asian Pacific American and White students, but not for students from other racial groups that were included in their study. The "Asian American" racial umbrella, however, is a wide one including many ethnicities. In one study that examined this within-group differences, membership in student organizations positively predicted sense of belonging for Chinese American, Korean American, Vietnamese American, Multi-Racial Asian American, Multi-Ethnic Asian American, and Other Asian American students while it did not for Asian Indian and Filipino American students (Li, 2018). Finally, Strayhorn's (2012) studies about the experiences of Black men have found that the need to belong has been a motivator for participation in student organizations, which resulted in educational success for these students.

While involvement in co-curricular activities is important for students with both privileged and minoritized identities, for minoritized students it is important that they can be their "authentic selves and develop authentic connections" in student organizations (Vaccaro & Newman, 2016, p. 935). Other research has suggested the

importance of finding identity-based groups as a means to develop a sense of belonging (Means & Pyne, 2017; Strayhorn, 2012), but joining a group where a minoritized student can live authentically is more important (Vaccaro & Newman). Li's (2018) research suggests a similar experience. While on the whole involvement positively predicted sense of belonging, involvement in racial and ethnic groups significantly and negatively predicted sense of belonging in the aggregate. Again, however, it is complex because when disaggregated by ethnicity (Chinese American, Filipino American, Multi-Ethnic, etc.) even those findings were not consistent. Chinese students, for example followed her general findings, whereas for some ethnic groups, involvement in racial/ethnic groups positively predicted belonging.

Diverse Student Interactions and Finding Others "Like Them." The previous discussion about involvement in student organizations, and the connection between identity-based organizations and belonging relates to two other intertwined factors that influence belonging – interactions with students from diverse backgrounds and finding other students similar to them. Some studies have found that interacting with peers from different racial or ethnic backgrounds, or with differing perspectives increases sense of belonging for Latinx (Johnson et al., 2007; Maestas et al., 2007), some Asian American ethnic groups (Li, 2018), Black, and White students (Hausmann et al., 2009; Strayhorn, 2008). All of these studies, however, are quantitative in design.

Qualitative studies have found that finding other students "like them" is also important to belonging. Again, minoritized students need to find places on campus where, and people with whom, they be their authentic selves (Vaccaro & Newman, 2016). This idea has been found to be consistent with Native American students

(Tachine et al., 2017), students with disabilities (Stapleton & Nicolazzo, 2019; Vaccaro, Daly-Cano, & Newman, 2015), students of color (Means & Pyne, 2017; Orta et al., 2019; Strayhorn, 2012, 2019), and even commuter students (Pokorny et al., 2017). While the same has been found for students with sexually minoritized identities, the findings are more nuanced to include the need to feel accepted as a community and as an individual who holds that identity (Vaccaro & Newman, 2017). Another study involving Black Gay men from one large primarily White institution, however, found that since the study participants were able to find so few others who held the same intersecting identities, they relied on disparate groups – mainly White Gay men and Black women – to find a source of connection (Strayhorn et al., 2008).

Academic Experiences. A student's academic experience, in addition to their social experience, affects sense of belonging as well. A wealth of research has found that interactions with faculty members can increase sense of belonging for students (Bowman et al., 2019; Freeman et al., 2007; Hausmann et al., 2007, Hoffman, Richmond, Morrow, & Salomone, 2002-2003; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Manley Lima, 2014; Means & Pyne, 2017; Vaccaro et al., 2015). These interactions, however, are only beneficial if they are positive ones. In order to contribute to students' sense of belonging, faculty members need to be supportive (Hoffman et al.), encouraging of students to participate in class (Freeman et al), and sensitive to students' identities (Means & Pyne; Vaccaro et al.). However, Freeman and her colleagues found that just because a student's experience in one class contributes to their sense of belonging, does not mean that it translates to a sense of belonging in other courses or the

institution as a whole, which, again, points to the nuance that is associated with developing a sense of belonging in college.

In addition to interactions with faculty members, other academic experiences influence sense of belonging as well. First, having a smooth academic (and social) transition into college has been found to be important (Hausmann et al., 2007; Johnson et al., 2007). Hausmann and her team even found that a positive transition at the start of a student's career has a lasting impact on belonging throughout that student's first year. Second, participating in learning communities (i.e., a cluster of courses which students take together) also helps with sense of belonging, however the researchers propose that it is the social connections made through having multiple courses together rather than anything inherent about the coursework that contributes to belonging (Hoffman et al., 2002-2003). Third, interactions with college staff and administrators, who provide connections and support as advisors, on-campus job supervisors, and formal and informal mentors can influence belonging (Manley Lima, 2014; Li, 2018). Finally, academic support programs are helpful, especially for students who come from low socioeconomic backgrounds (Means & Pyne, 2017; Ostrove & Long, 2007).

Interestingly, just transitioning to college and belonging may be a self-reinforcing phenomenon (Hurtado & Carter, 2007; Johnson et al., 2007), so too may be one's academic success and belonging. In the study that Freeman and her colleagues did on belonging in the classroom environment, they found that sense of belonging was significantly and positively related to academic self-efficacy, intrinsic motivation, and student interest in coursework. Meanwhile, Bowman's research team

(2019) found that feeling academically productive and successful served as a positive predictor for belonging in college. These findings in combination suggest that success as a student and belonging may build on one another. Vaccaro, Daly-Cano, and Newman (2016) actually found this to be the case with students with disabilities – developing a sense of belonging for their participants assisted with their ability to self-advocate and succeed academically, which in turn furthered their belonging.

Detractors from Belonging

Just as certain experiences contribute to college students' sense of belonging, there are experiences that detract from it as well. In some ways the two are related, and detractors can be considered a lower-quality experience on a detractor-contributor continuum. For example, involvement and relationships with faculty both lie on such a continuum. Therefore, those who have low or no involvement in co-curricular activities, or have apathetic or insensitive faculty members are likely not to benefit from belonging through those avenues. There are, however, specific detractors worth reviewing that will be the focus of this section: over-involvement, discretionary spending, and an unwelcoming environment.

Over-Involvement. Even though involvement is important to developing a sense of belonging (e.g., Johnson et al., 2007; Vaccaro & Newman, 2015), becoming *over-involved*, meaning spending too great a proportion of one's time on co-curricular activities, can have a negative effect on belonging. The point at which involvement becomes over-involvement, however, is unclear. As discussed in the previous section, one study found that involvement does not have a significantly predictive effect on belonging unless a student spends at least five hours a week

participating in co-curricular activities. This study's findings even suggest that skipping class occasionally to participate in activities is beneficial in terms of belonging due to the social connections students make from them. Skipping too many classes to the point where a student's academics decline, though, also has a negative influence on a student's overall sense of belonging (Bowman et al., 2019).

The effects of over-involvement on belonging are present in Greek-letter organization membership. The amount of time that the organization's activities require can detract from participants' general sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2012). This finding makes sense since joining a Greek-letter organization comes with a number of structured mandatory activities such as meetings and attending events planned by their own chapter, as well as events planned by other Greek-letter organizations (Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013; DeSantis, 2007). This may be particularly salient during a student's new member, or "pledging," period as they join their organization (Strayhorn), especially if the chapter engages in hazing activities that isolate new members from non-members (Allan & Madden, 2008).

Discretionary Spending. The cost of higher education is one that has received much attention recently. There are a number of costs associated with college beyond tuition and fees such as paying for books, transportation to and from campus, and, for commuter students, rent. On top of these costs, students may need to spend more money to develop social relationships (Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013; McClure & Ryder, 2018). Ostrove and Long's (2007) study of one selective liberal arts college found that both subjective social class (how students self-identify) and objective social class (based on family income and parental education and occupation) predicted sense

of belonging. Put another way, the higher a student's subjective and objective social class, the more that student felt like they belonged at their institution. Another study found that students at one regional public institution from lower income families were significantly more like to spend money on activities they could not afford in order keep up with their peers and feel like they were not excluded. The inability of students to pay for events caused them to adjust their peer group to spend time with others from families with similar incomes, sneak into ticketed events, or not participate at all, causing them to feel socially isolated (McClure & Ryder). This phenomenon may disproportionately affect commuter students, who have been found to work in order to pay for bills and rent over other activities (Alfano & Eduljee, 2013).

Further, the ability to access discretionary funds serves as an inhibitor to participation in a Greek-letter organization (Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013; McClure & Ryder, 2018). Membership has a number of costs. In addition to semester dues, members often pay for other experiences and items in order to "keep up" with the rest of their peers including going out on weekends, buying clothes for chapter functions, and reducing work hours to attend mandatory events. Armstrong and Hamilton's (2013) study of sorority women at a large state institution found that chapters disciplined members who missed events, even when they could not attend due to their inability to pay for the associated extra costs such as entry fees or required outfits, or they simply had to work in order to pay for the sorority. As a result, at least one of their participants ended up leaving her sorority and transferring to a less expensive regional public institution closer to home.

Unwelcoming Environment. Experiences that directly or indirectly invalidate students' identities send the message that they are not welcomed at their institutions and have a negative influence on belonging. These messages can be in the form of explicit discrimination (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Li, 2018), microaggressions (Li; Strayhorn, 2012, 2019), or the creation of college programs or systems that do not support specific groups of students (Dueñas & Gloria, 2017; Orta et al., 2019; Tachine et al., 2017). Simply the perception that the campus in unwelcoming to a student due to their identity can have a negative effect on belonging (Hurtado & Carter; Johnson et al., 2017; Li; Vaccaro & Newman, 2017). One study even found that first-generation low-income students, most of whom were also students of color, received and internalized messages that shaped their expectations regarding the extent to which they would belong prior to even arriving on campus (Means & Pyne, 2017).

Physical and administrative institutional structures can also reduce belonging. One way this occurs is inhibiting interactions between students with similar backgrounds due to a lack of dedicated space or programming. Isolation and separation from their own cultures detracted from sense of belonging for Native American (Tachine et al., 2017) and Latinx students (Dueñas & Gloria, 2017; Orta et al., 2019). Similar arguments have been made about commuter students, who need spaces to connect with one another (Pokorny et al., 2017), class availability that aligns with their schedules (Braxton et al., 2014; Weiss 2014), and involvement opportunities designed to include them (Clay, 2016; Manley Lima, 2014). Finally, the perception or reality of students from dominant groups being held to a lower level of conduct accountability than minoritized groups can also make students feel like they do not

belong (Means & Pyne, 2017). Ray (2013) also found this to be the case at the group-level with historically Black fraternities, whose members observed the wealthier historically White fraternities with prominent alumni were able to skirt conduct sanctions due to the connections they had with the institution.

Section Summary

As described in the introduction of this section, belonging is a multifaceted construct that is influenced by a number of different academic and social experiences. The outcomes associated with belonging – mainly, positive transitions, persistence, and self-actualization – make it a worthy endeavor for scholars to explore, and for faculty and staff to work toward developing in their students. One apparent feature of the college student sense of belonging literature is that the research has focused quite a bit on the experiences of minoritized students. It is worth reiterating that commuter students, who navigate college structures that are generally designed for residential students (Attewell & Lavin, 2012; Jacoby, 2015), can also be considered a minoritized student population. While scholars who have written about commuter students and sense of belonging have not explicitly described them as such, they have argued that belonging matters for this group of students, just as it matters for residential ones (Manley Lima, 2014; Wilmes & Quade, 1986).

Chapter Summary

This chapter provided a review of the three main areas of literature that are pertinent to this study: (1) commuter students, (2) Greek-letter organization membership, and (3) sense of belonging. One word to describe these bodies of work is complex. As a group, commuter students are in some ways unique and in other ways

similar to the “traditional” 18 to 22 year-old college student. Also as a group, Greek-letter organizations encompass a number of different types, and membership is associated with some quite remarkable, and quite horrifying, experiences and outcomes. Finally, developing a sense of belonging is a nuanced experienced that can be felt, or not, at different institutional levels.

While there are a number of gaps in the literature, the one that I am focusing on is the experience of commuter students in Greek-letter organizations at primarily commuter public institutions. Even though Heida (1986) conceptually described this experience over 30 years ago, presumably based on experience and observation, the experience has been all but neglected in the literature on Greek-letter organizations. When the experience has been studied, researchers have used quantitative methods, and only one study focused exclusively on participants from a primarily commuter institution (Yearwood & Jones, 2012). While these studies have provided some information about the outcomes associated with membership for commuter students, qualitative research is necessary to understand the experience of those commuter members at primarily commuter institutions. Understanding the experience of commuter students in Greek-letter organizations is important because they benefit from these types of involvement opportunities, but policies and practices designed for residential students, as many higher education policies are (Attewell & Lavin, 2012; Jacoby, 2015), may not be conducive to participation. In order to gain a more complete understanding, the participants must have lived the full experience from new students through graduation, which makes alumni of Greek-letter organizations chapters at primarily commuter public institutions a valuable group of participants.

Therefore, the primary research question for this study is: *How do alumni who were commuter students and members of Greek-letter organizations at primarily commuter public institutions describe their member experience?*

Further, Greek-letter organizations promote a sense of belonging (e.g., Hurtado & Carter, 1999), which is beneficial for all students, but may be especially important for commuter students who may only have a limited amount of time to spend on campus during the week (e.g., Kirk & Lewis, 2015). Sense of belonging is also an appropriate lens to take because, again, it is often used in research involving minoritized student groups (e.g., Vaccaro & Newman, 2015), which I argue commuter students are due to the institutional structures that typically get designed for residential students. The secondary research questions, therefore, are:

1. *What comprised the experience of belonging for these alumni?*
2. *What, if anything, lead to or detracted from their sense of belonging?*
3. *How, if at all, did their membership contribute to their sense of belonging on campus?*

The next chapter will outline the methods of the study. It will include a variety of sections such as the theoretical and conceptual frameworks, information about the participants, and data collection and analysis methods. Elements of trustworthiness will also be addressed, which are necessary to ensure the quality of the study (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2014).

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

This chapter describes the background and process of carrying out the research for this study. The first sections of this chapter describe my theoretical framework, conceptual framework, and positionality. The next two sections describe the method I used in the study, Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009), and my *epoché*, which is a reflective process used prior to engaging in phenomenological research (van Manen, 2014). After a description of IPA and clarifying my *epoché*, I describe the processes of selecting participants, provide a brief description of the participants, and outline the data collection and analysis process. The last two sections describe the trustworthiness measured used and the limitations of the study.

Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks

The theoretical and conceptual frameworks I used in this study were constructionism and sense of belonging, respectively. *Constructionism* assumes that "all knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context" (Crotty, 1998, p. 42). In essence, this means that the world is understood through our interactions with others, and is influenced by our environments as well as the social locations that we hold. Crotty gives an example of a tree: a named object whose

meaning will be understood differently by a hiker, an arborist, and a logger. Similarly, "college" is a named experience that will have different meanings for a residential, a returning adult, and a commuter student.

Constructionism was an appropriate framework for this study for a number of reasons. First, the idea that people construct their own knowledge is one of the philosophical underpinnings of qualitative higher education research (Broido & Manning, 2002). Second, both IPA and constructionism draw from Heidegger's interpretivist ontology (Crotty, 1998; Smith et al., 2009). A third reason was that constructionism supports the assumption that specific institutional types, such as primarily commuter institutions, matters. Broido and Manning (2002) made this connection when they asserted that "constructionist epistemologies to students affairs professionals' understanding of the world expands their ability to work effectively toward the *missions and purposes* of higher education" (p. 444, emphasis added), suggesting that institutional types affect student experiences and the way we, as student affairs professionals, design our work. Further, other studies in higher education that have used constructionism as a theoretical framework have honed in on institutional types such as community colleges (Yancey Gulley, 2017), Hispanic serving institutions (Guardia & Evans, 2008), and small colleges and universities (Kortegast & Hamrick, 2009). Finally, constructionism invites the use of a critical lens throughout the research process (Crotty). Weinburg (2008) described one of the purposes of constructionism as "the recognition that things could be otherwise and that we might make them so" (p. 35), which is important because this study considers the experiences of Greek-letter organization membership in light of the needs commonly

associated with commuter students. Through this framework, this study challenges the assumption that membership is connected with living on campus.

In addition to constructionism used as a guide for this work, I used sense of belonging as a conceptual framework. As previously discussed in chapter two, researchers have defined sense of belonging in a number of ways. This multiplicity of definitions, along with the inductive process of data analysis, led me to approach my study without a specific *a priori* definition. While I wanted to approach the study with this lens since developing a sense of belonging is an important process for college students (Strayhorn, 2012, 2019) and is associated with Greek-letter organization membership (Cohen, McCreary, & Schutts, 2017; McCreary & Schutts, 2015), I refrained from a specific definition to allow the participants to describe belonging – when they did at all – in their own words (Smith et al., 2009).

Positionality

Jones, Torres, and Arminio (2014) described *positionality* as "the relationship between the researcher and [their] participants and the researcher and [their] topic" (p. 26). When the researcher reflects on their assumptions, identities, and experiences relevant to their study, it helps to ensure they approach their data authentically, and not in ways that merely align with their own position as it relates to the participants and topic. Further, not only does including one's positionality increase the study's trustworthiness, it shares the lens through which the researcher approaches their work with the reader (Jones et al.; Ravitch & Carl, 2016). For the purposes of this study, there are three important aspects of my positionality to discuss: (1) my fraternity

experience, (2) my work at as a Greek-letter organization advisor, and (3) my experience working with commuter students.

Fraternity Experience

I joined my fraternity at a mid-sized primarily residential state university as a first-year student in the spring 2005 semester. Unlike the dominant narrative in the media, the experience of joining my fraternity was a positive one, and our national policies were such that there was no pledging period; I had the same rights and responsibilities as all other brothers in the fraternity as soon as I was offered an invitation for membership. I held a number of leadership positions as an undergraduate member, including three terms on the chapter executive board and a one term on the Interfraternity Council. Further, I also had the opportunity to attend my fraternity's regional and national leadership conferences. These experiences exposed me to the broader Greek-letter organization world beyond what general members are typically able to access.

For me, my fraternity was one of the spaces on campus I felt like I belonged the most. As a chapter that did not have a house, *space* was typically a social one – time with my brothers whether or not we were conducting fraternity business. The social opportunities, however, were also facilitated by the physical spaces in we gathered, including the student union lounge, dining halls, the quad, and the houses groups of brothers rented off-campus. Certainly there were other places and spaces at the university where I felt a strong sense of belonging (as a music major, the music department was one of them) but my fraternity experience served as conduit to feel

like I belonged elsewhere on campus, which facilitated my initiative to seek out and participate in other involvement opportunities.

One influential component of my experience was well-developed Greek-letter organization program at my undergraduate institution. I look part in workshops designed for new members, attended leadership retreats, took a class on leadership in Greek-letter organizations, participated and assisted with community events, and interned in the Greek Affairs Office. Having the opportunity to engage in such a breadth and depth of opportunities influenced the way that I thought about Greek-letter organization membership; mainly that when done "right" (i.e., a focus on the connections between members as opposed to just parties, and an experience free of hazing), I believe joining a Greek-letter organization can be the best experience a student has during college.

Greek-Letter Organization Advisor

I have served as a Greek-letter organization advisor in multiple capacities since I completed my undergraduate degree, including serving as the alumni advisor for two chapters of my fraternity, a house director for a different fraternity, and, most importantly, as a graduate assistant and professional. These last roles are the most important because the discourse in the Greek-letter organization advising profession has informed my work and the way I view a "positive" Greek-letter organization experience. For me, based on both my undergraduate experience and the advising profession, a positive experience would be one that is not centered on drinking and is free of hazing. I recognize, however, that other Greek-letter organization members – including both undergraduates and alumni – may consider one or both of those

activities as essential and positive aspects of membership. Further, there are legal and ethical requirements that I must follow since I am employed as campus-based advisor during the time of the study. For example, were I to interview undergraduate participants who discussed getting hazed as a positive contributor to their sense of belonging within their chapters, I would legally have to report it if they were a student at my institution or at an institution in a state where hazing is illegal, but even if came from a state where hazing is not illegal, I would ethically have to report it to their institution's advisor.

Reflecting on my professional work more generally, I have found that the functional areas within student affairs to which I am most drawn are those that foster a sense of belonging – Greek-letter organizations, student organization advising, new student orientation, and some components of residence life. Certainly the relationships that students form with professionals in other students affairs functional areas, such as advising or career development, can aid in sense of belonging, but for me, I do not see developing a sense of belonging as a primary element of the work itself. The literature connecting involvement to retention and community aside, I believe that helping students feel like they belong is an essential piece to working with college students and a necessary one in order for them to have a meaningful college experience.

Experience Working with Commuter Students

At the time of writing this dissertation, I have spent over six years working in a student activities at a primarily commuter intuition where my main function is to oversee our Greek-letter organization program. In graduate school I had a summer internship at a primarily commuter public institution where I was first introduced to

the commuter student experience. One comment I remember my supervisor at the time made related to the students' need to work. He told me one of the challenges they had with students is that many of them have jobs off-campus, so sometimes a student will get promoted to manager at a fast food restaurant and prioritize that over their college careers or leave the university completely. I found that anecdote to be very different from the experiences of my students at the small private residential university at which I worked during the academic year, and the experiences of my peers at my primarily residential undergraduate institution – granted, I am not sure how many of peers either had to work in order to attend college, and of those who did, how many were open about it.

Based on that internship experience I knew that working with commuter students would involve *some* adaption of the way I typically thought about and executed my work. I did not realize, however, just how much I would actually have to re-conceptualize, and found that I had to shift my assumptions about students' needs and interests, and incorporate this new perspective in my advocacy for students, the programs I design, and policies I write. My observations, however, strongly aligned with the literature. Many of the students at my current institution need to work, live with family members, are first-generation college students, are students of color, have a limited amount of time on campus, and, unless they become involved, feel largely disconnected from the institution. The narrative I hear from students, however, also aligns with research findings. It is not that the students are not interested in becoming involved, it is that the involvement opportunities do not always meet their needs or are able to be balanced with their other responsibilities.

Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis

Phenomenology is a research method rooted in philosophy, whose founder is considered to be the German mathematician, Edmund Husserl (1859-1938; van Manen, 2014). For Husserl (1931/2013), the goal of phenomenology was to examine "objects that can be known through experience" (p. 52). This is called the *lifeworld* in phenomenology: "the world of everyday lived experience [which serves as] the source and object of phenomenological research" (van Manen, 2014, p. 313). Husserl considered experiences to be "real" because they existed for a specific duration in space and time, but in order to study them, we have to separate that specific experience from our prior experiences and understandings in order to obtain an accurate description (1931/2013). As phenomenology evolved, however, one strand of thought moved away from that positivist approach to experience, and has followed the work of one of Husserl's students, Martin Heidegger (1889 – 1976), who emphasized the importance of an experience's interpretation over its description (Cerbone, 2008; van Manen, 2014).

As the name suggests, Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) emphasizes interpretation, and, therefore, draws on those phenomenologists who embrace this approach, most notably, Heidegger (Smith et al., 2009). IPA is "committed to the examination of how people make sense of their major life experiences" (p. 1), and draws from three foundational areas of work: phenomenology, idiography, and hermeneutics. The first, phenomenology, is described above. While IPA diverges from Husserl's approach to phenomenology, Smith and his colleagues note his influence on the study of experiences. Second,

idiography focuses on particularities, which manifests in both the specificity of participant selection and the amount of detail provided in the analysis. Finally, *hermeneutics* is the study of interpretation, which is done on two levels in IPA, thus the *double* hermeneutic approach: the participant first engages in interpretation as they make sense of the experience under study, then the researcher engages in interpretation of the participants' responses. With IPA's strong emphasis on interpretation, some have raised questions about its appropriateness as a phenomenological method, primarily the psychologist Amedeo Giorgi (2010). As Smith (2010) and Smith et al. (2009) noted, however, Giorgi's work draws primarily from Husserl rather than Heidegger (Giorgi, 1997; Giorgi, Giorgi, & Morley, 2018). Therefore, while IPA does not hold the same assumptions as Husserl's phenomenology, it is still rooted in a well-thought out phenomenological tradition.

Epoché

Developing an *epoché* is an essential step in phenomenological research a researcher carries out prior to data collection (van Manen, 2014). In Husserl's (1931/2013) conceptualization of phenomenology, an *epoché* is developed through a process called bracketing, which Moustakas (1994) described as the process of separating out the researcher's "predilections, prejudices, and allowing things, events, and people to enter anew into consciousness . . . [in order] to look and see them again, as if for the first time" (p. 85). An interpretive approach to phenomenology, such as IPA, however, suggests that one can never completely bracket themselves out of their study as Husserl initially intended (Smith et al., 2009; van Manen, 1990). Due to this assumption, Smith and his colleagues do not require developing an *epoché* when doing

a study using IPA. Even so, developing one is important for the reader and myself prior to analyzing and interpreting the data as a matter of trustworthiness.

While there are no clear steps to the development of an *epoché,* Jones et al. (2014) suggested that the process is unique to each person and research project. My process involved reflecting on my experiences and writing about the assumptions and understandings I have about those experiences in my research journal. I found that the list of statements I created were strongly related to, and often overlapped with, my positionality. Here are two examples:

- I am assuming that membership in Greek-letter organizations for commuter students will aid them in their sense of belonging. I need to be careful with this assumption because their experience may have nothing to do with belonging at all. My connection with belonging as a framework is largely due to my own experience of belonging as one of the significant benefits I had as a fraternity member.
- I do not believe that college experience for commuter students is "less than" the residential experience. I do hold the assumption, however, that it is qualitatively different from the residential experience, and that it is easier for students to have a less meaningful college experience because of their potentially limited time on campus.

These examples illustrate how closely related my *epoché* and positionality are. It is unlikely that I would hold these assumptions and understandings about commuter students in Greek-letter organizations were I not a fraternity man, a campus-based advisor, and had professional experience in this area. Further, in acknowledging my

own assumptions and understandings, I acknowledge and honor the reality that my participants may hold ones that are different. I needed to be aware of these assumptions and others listed in my journal as I collected, analyzed, and interpreted data, the process for which I describe next.

Setting

Participants for this study were selected from four-year, primarily commuter, public institutions with no Greek-letter organization housing that is owned, operated, or controlled by entities associated with Greek-letter organizations such as national headquarters, housing corporations, or alumni boards. An institution is considered to be "primarily commuter" if it aligns with the Carnegie Classification System of Institutions of Higher Education definition of *primarily non-residential institutions* – that is, colleges and universities with fewer than 25% of their students housed in institutionally-owned, -operated, or –controlled facilities; and/or have fewer than 50% of their students enrolled full-time (Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research, 2017). The additional requirement of institutions without Greek-letter organization-owned, -operated, or -controlled facilities is because there is no guarantee students living in those facilities are included in campus residence counts (or, if included, done so accurately). Therefore, an institution that is classified as "primarily non-residential" may in fact have more than 25% of students living on campus if they had a large number of students living in these types of Greek-letter organization facilities. For example, a college with 10,000 students that reports 2,400 students (24%) living in institutional facilities would be classified as "primarily non-residential." If that same institution, however, had an additional 600 students living in

Greek-letter organization facilities owned and operated by local or national housing corporations, and were not counted by the institution, the total number of students living on campus would be 3,000, which is 30% of the student population, and would exceed the 25% threshold of a "primarily nonresidential" classification.

Participant Recruitment

This study utilized both purposeful and snowball sampling techniques to recruit participants. The use of purposeful samples is important in qualitative research to ensure that participants in the study are able to speak to the phenomenon being explored (Creswell, 2014; Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Purposeful sampling also adds to the study's trustworthiness by providing more detail about the study's transferability, which helps readers decide the extent to which they can apply these findings to other contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Snowball sampling is helpful in cases when the initial group of participants knows others who also meet the criteria (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2012).

In order to be eligible for this study, participants had to be members of a social Greek-letter organization and (1) commute during their entire undergraduate career, (2) attended the institution from which they graduated for at least two years, and (3) have graduated from their institution within the last five years. Commuting for the duration of their undergraduate career is important because living on campus can affect a student's experiences (Mayhew et al., 2016; Strange & Banning, 2001, 2015; Wessel & Salisbury, 2017). Next, selecting alumni allowed for participants to discuss their full undergraduate experience, which was important for the phenomenological design of this study (Husserl, 1931/2013; Smith et al., 2009; van Manen, 1990, 2014).

Finally, limiting the participants to alumni also avoided murky legal and ethical implications of the study previously described, because it reduced the likelihood I needed to report any experiences that broke the law or common college policies, such as anecdotes about hazing or underage drinking.

Contact information for the initial group of participants was obtained through the campus-based advisors at primarily commuter institutions and through personal connections. My initial outreach was to advisors with whom I had personal and professional relationships, and then expanded to those who I had not met. The advisors serve as gatekeepers to alumni contact information, which required me to be transparent about the study and gain their confidence before I was able to access the information (Rossman & Rallis, 2017). My first communication with them about the study included an introduction to the study, the participant criteria, and a confirmation that the institution had no recognized Greek-letter organization housing, with a follow-up e-mail sent two weeks after the first (Appendix A). This process yielded 32 names of potential participants who I e-mailed. Follow-up messages were sent to non-responders two and four weeks after the first attempted contact (Appendix B). When a potential participant responded, I verified they met the participation criteria and asked if they could provide me the contact information of others who may be interested in the study. Of the initial group, 20 responded, eight who met the criteria agreed to participate, and an additional participant was recruited through snowball sampling, for a total of nine participants in the study.

Participants

Nine participants were included in this study. Of them, three identified as men, six as women, six as White, and one as gay. They attended four different institutions from across the United States, representing the northeast, mid-Atlantic, south, and west coast. The participants represented membership from five historically White sororities, two historically White fraternities, and one co-educational multicultural Greek-letter society. One participant transferred from a local community college. With the exception of Dustin, all the participants lived at home with their parents throughout their undergraduate careers. All participants held leadership positions in their chapters or Greek-letter organization community. The participants used a variety of methods to travel, with a one-way commute time ranging from 10 minutes to up to two hours, and worked a range of 15 to over 30 hours per week. A brief description of each participant follows, and is summarized in Table 3.1. All the names, institutions, and organizations used are pseudonyms.

Dustin

Dustin attended Northeast State College (NSC) and joined Kappa Rho in his first year. At 22 years old, he was slightly older than "traditional" first-year students. He worked over 30 hours per week, and lived off-campus by himself with non-students. While he did not live far from campus, he did not have a car so he either walked or took the bus, which took 15 to 45 minutes each way. During college, he was the vice president and treasurer of his chapter, the vice president of recruitment on the Interfraternity Council, and an undergraduate representative on Kappa Rho's national

board of directors. He also served as a national field representative for his chapter after he graduated. Dustin identifies as a straight White man.

Hope

Hope also attended NSC and joined Pi Gamma in her second semester, which was the first semester she was eligible to join. She joined in Pi Gamma's first semester affiliated with a national sorority, after operating as a local sorority for six years. She worked 20 hours per week and drove 50 minutes to campus. She held a number of positions including philanthropy chair, vice president, and president. Hope identifies as a straight White woman.

Jake

Jake joined Kappa Epsilon at Southern State University (SSU) in the summer prior to starting his first year. SSU had 21 fraternities and sororities when he was in college, which is much larger than the communities at the institutions the other participants attended. Jake was his chapter's vice president of finance and new member educator, as well at the Interfraternity Council vice president, and president of the Order of Omega honor society. He lived at home throughout college, which was a 10-minute drive away from SSU and worked 20 to 25 hours per week. Jake identifies as a gay White man. He attributes his undergraduate experience and the connections he made during his time at SSU to be the reason why he is now a campus-based advisor for Greek-letter organizations.

Kevin

Kevin was a founding member of Beta Lambda, a co-educational multicultural Greek-letter society at NSC. He joined in his junior year and held the vice president of

finance position during his senior year. Prior to attending NSC, Kevin spent over four years at a local community college as a part-time student. He lived approximately 45 minutes away from campus and worked 15 to 25 hours a week. Kevin identifies as a straight White man.

KW

KW joined Rho Sigma sorority at the beginning of her sophomore year, after meeting some members of the Greek-letter organization community as an orientation leader the summer after her first year. She took the train or bus from home to West Coast University (WCU) her first two years, which took one to two hours each way. After the first two years, she got a car, which reduced her commute to about 20 minutes. KW held leadership positions at the Greek-letter organization community-level as the Greek Leadership Council vice president of internal affairs and president. She worked 10 to 20 hours per week. KW identifies as a straight Black woman.

Lys

Lys is one of KW's sorority sisters from WCU, who joined two years prior to KW, but also in her sophomore year after her involvement as an orientation leader. She drove to WCU throughout college, which was 15- to 25-minute drive. Lys held the positions of vice president of communications and alumnae relations chairwoman in her chapter and worked 25 to 35 hours per week. When she was an undergraduate, her chapter grew from 80 members to over 100 members. At the time of the interview, Lys was also involved in the local regional Rho Sigma alumnae association. Lys identifies as a straight Hispanic woman.

Table 3.1

Participant Descriptions

Name	College/ University	Chapter	Chapter Leadership Position	Greek Community Leadership Position	Gender	Race/ Ethnicity	Sexual Identity	Commute Time (One-Way)	Avg. Hours Worked (Weekly)	Notes
Dustin	NSC	Kappa Rho	Yes	Yes	Man	White	Straight	15 - 45	30+	Started college at 22
Hope	NSC	Pi Gamma	Yes	No	Woman	White	Straight	50	20	
Jake	SSU	Kappa Epsilon	Yes	Yes	Man	White	Gay	10	20 - 25	College donor
Kevin	NSC	Beta Lambda	Yes	No	Man	White	Straight	45	15 - 25	Transfer student
KW	WCU	Rho Sigma	Yes	Yes	Woman	Black	Straight	20 - 120	10 - 20	College donor
Lys	WCU	Rho Sigma	Yes	No	Woman	Hispanic	Straight	15 - 25	25 - 35	Involved in local alumnae association
Molly	ECU	Lambda Pi	Yes	Yes	Woman	White	Straight	30 - 40	30	
Nicole	NSC	Alpha Gamma	Yes	No	Woman	Italian - Cape Verdean	Straight	15	25+	Assisted with caring for a sibling
Victoria	NSC	Gamma Rho	Yes	Yes	Woman	White	Straight	20 - 25	16	Chapter alumnae advisor

Molly

Molly joined Lambda Pi sorority at East Coast University (ECU) in the fall of her sophomore year, after spending the spring semester of her first year improving her GPA to meet the chapter's membership standards. She lived 30 to 40 minutes away from ECU, commuting by train her first three years of college and driving herself during her last two years, and she worked 30 hours per week. Molly held leadership positions at the community-level as the vice president of the Panhellenic Council and the secretary of the Greek Council. Molly identifies as a straight White woman. She is currently a campus-based Greek-letter organization advisor.

Nicole

Nicole had a strong interest in joining a sorority prior to attending NSC. She joined Alpha Gamma in the spring of her sophomore year, which was the first semester she was eligible to join a sorority. In her sorority, she held a number of leadership positions, but the most prominent one was vice president of member development. Nicole's commute was a 15-minute car ride from NSC. She lived at home with her parents and assisted them with taking care of a brother with a disability, in addition to working over 25 hours per week. Ethnically, Nicole identifies as a straight Italian-Cape Verdean woman.

Victoria

Victoria joined a local sorority as a sophomore at NSC, which was absorbed by the national sorority, Gamma Rho, in her third year. While she did not hold any positions in the local sorority, she was Gamma Rho's president and then vice president of organizational development. She also was president and vice president of

recruitment for the Panhellenic Council. Victoria's parents dropped her off at NSC her first two years since she did not have a driver's license. After her second year she was able to drive herself the remaining four years she attended NSC, which was a 20- to 25-minute commute each way. During college, Victoria worked about 16 hours per week. She currently is her chapter's primary alumnae advisor. Victoria identifies as a straight White woman.

Data Collection

Data was collected using in-depth semi-structured interviews in-person and through the online video call platform, Zoom. Interviews are an appropriate data collection process when exploring a participant's "lived experience" (Ravitch & Carl, 2016, p. 146), which is a fundamental concept in phenomenology (Husserl, 1931/2013; Smith et al., 2009; van Manen, 2014). The goal of these interviews was to encourage participants to describe their experience fully. I developed and followed a protocol based on Creswell (2014) and Smith et al.'s (2009) recommendations, which sought to elicit responses from participants about both *what happened* and the *meaning they made* about the phenomenon under study. Guardia (2009) and Weiss (2014) utilized both types of questions in their phenomenological dissertations, and following recommendations for IPA, the questions that sought descriptive responses were asked before those that sought interpretive ones (Smith et al., 2009). The initial protocol was used with two volunteers who met the participation criteria, and was adjusted based on their responses and feedback. The final protocol is presented in Appendix C.

Prior to the interviews, participants completed a consent form (Appendix D) and a participant information form (Appendix E). Interviews were initially scheduled for 90 minutes, but lasted between 32 and 72 minutes. The interviews were recorded and transcribed, with the final transcriptions sent back to the participants for review with the opportunity to add any additional thoughts they may have had. After each transcript was completed and the participant had the opportunity to review it, the transcript was uploaded into the cloud-based, qualitative data management program, Dedoose, for analysis. Once initial themes were developed, they were shared with the participants for review and additional commentary. This process occurred through follow-up phone calls with eight of the nine participants, during which I sought clarification on their responses and unclear aspects of the findings, and gathered their thoughts about the final themes. One participant did not respond to e-mail requests for more information.

In order to ensure confidentiality, all participants and institutions were assigned pseudonyms, which were kept as a list in a separate file. The recordings, transcripts, and other related documents were kept on a password-protected computer and locked filing cabinet. All files were encrypted for additional protection.

Data Analysis

There are six steps to analyzing data using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis. While they are listed linearly here, the influence of hermeneutics is present as data analysis involves a "dynamic relationship between the part and the whole at a series of levels" in what is called the *hermeneutic circle* (Smith et al., 2009, p. 28). I began this process when writing memos after each interview in my research journal, in

which I included notes about the particular interview as well as notes as to how that interview related to others. Once I began the process of coding data, the use of hermeneutics involved going back to the participants' transcripts in order to contextualize specific quotes, as well as looking at a specific quote in the context of other similarly coded quotes in order to find similarities and differences within a single axial or thematic code. This process continued with the axial codes themselves, as I worked with them and the quotes assigned to them in order to develop themes.

Returning to the six steps of IPA specifically, the first is to read and re-read the transcripts. The first read-though was completed to ensure accuracy with the recording, and the second read-through was completed after edits were made to reflect the participants' responses accurately. A third read-through occured during the process of completing the second step, which is to make notes describing the content, language usage, and conceptual ideas in the transcripts. And example from that step is as follows: Victoria shared the following about how her experience changed at her college once she joined a sorority, "I had more to do…my experience from college changed because I had friends and I had more to do. I wasn't going home, going to class, doing work, it gave me more to do." I made the comment, "The transformation of her college experience," in the margins of the transcript, which was a conceptual idea that emerged early in the data collection process and eventually became an axial code.

The third step is to identify emergent themes, which I completed through a round of open and descriptive coding. Smith and his colleagues (2009) emphasized the importance of exploring how each participant describes the phenomenon

independently from one another. In order to do this, I wrote notes and short narrative with initial thoughts about the research questions for each participant after the first round of open and descriptive coding. This process allowed me to describe and reflect on each participants' responses individually, and, initially, ensured that the interview questions lead to data that would answer my research questions. The individualized attention to each participant's responses also was important because it complimented some of the notes in my research journal, which identified any prominent similarities between participants. In all, it helped to ensure that some of the idiosyncratic experiences were not lost in the corpus of data. For example, in the narrative for Kevin I wrote:

> Kevin has mixed feelings about his experience in his organization. While he is happy about the friendships and connections he made, he recognizes that some of the friendships he had prior to joining the organization were strained due to the business aspects that come along with a Greek-lettered organization.

While this particular experience was unique for him, it speaks to the larger idea that the experiences members have as undergraduates can influence their experience as alumni, which was present in most of the transcripts, and contrasted the many of the responses from other participants, who had a positive outlook on their relationships.

After writing a narrative and notes for each participant, I combined the open and descriptive codes into axial codes. This process resulted in 15 primary axial codes, many of which had sub-codes. I organized the axial codes into a coding frame, which I used to code the data a second time. The frame included a number, name, description, and, when possible, exemplary quote for each code. During this process, it became

apparent that some of the data clearly aligned with the literature. While I connected some of the codes and the code descriptions to the apparent literature where appropriate, I was careful to ensure that the literature did not drive my interpretation of the data, but rather make note of where the data aligned and diverged from the literature.

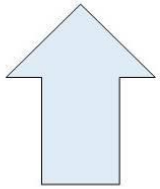
As recommended for participant groups of this size, I completed these first three steps before moving on to the fourth step in IPA, which is to make connections across themes. Following the round of axial coding, I analyzed the quotes associated with each code, made notes in my journal about how the codes might fit together as themes, and eventually combined the axial codes into 10 initial themes. Following the process of developing the axial codes, I created a thematic coding frame with a number, name, and description of each code. In order to follow the development of the themes, I also included a column with the axial code or codes from which that theme came. For example, the theme, "challenges and coping mechanisms," was a combination of the following axial codes: "commuter challenges," "'typical commuter challenges," "fraternity/sorority specific challenges," "coping strategies," "development of time management," and the portions of "understanding commitment" that related to self-efficacy (see Figure 3.1).

I then used that initial thematic coding frame to code the data a third time. Following that round of coding, I outlined the initial themes with their descriptions, initial findings, supporting quotes, and any clearly connected literature. I discussed that outline with a peer who has expertise in the experiences of commuter students, knowledge of Greek-letter organizations, and has done phenomenological research.

Figure 3.1

Axial Codes to Thematic Codes

22	Challenges and Coping Mechanisms	Participants had many of the same challenges as "typical" commuter students, which created some challenges unique to the F/S experience. This theme captures those, as well as the coping mechanisms they used to mitigate those challenges.	4-4b, 5, 5b, 5c references to "self-efficacy"



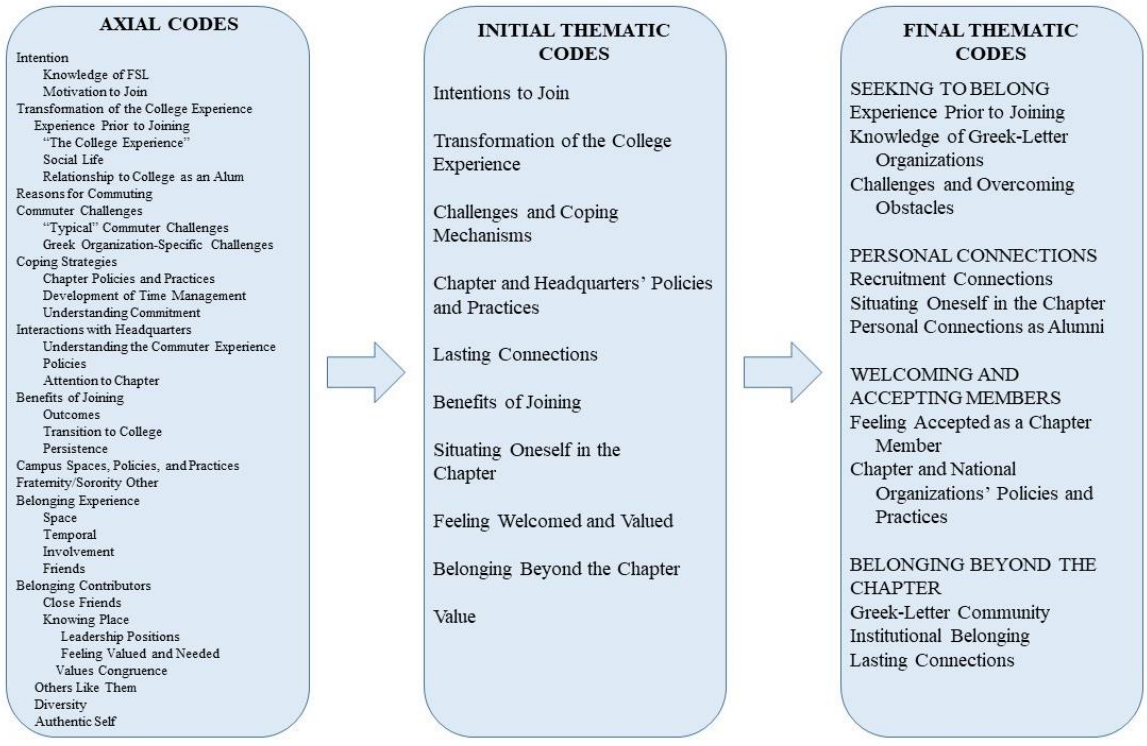
4	Commuter Challenges	Life situation that made their experience differ from the "typical" residential college student	There were times where it was stressful because not only am I paying for dues, I am also having to pay for gas, pay for food…being on campus all day, I'm going to need to eat lunch, dinner…[and paying for] the formals, the t-shirts, the philanthropies. That definitely was a little bit of a strain, I think (Jake, p. 6)
4a	"Typical" Commuter Challenges	Those challenges typically associated with being a commuter, especially identified by Burlison, Jacoby, and Wilmes & Quade	I think also students are busy. At commuter schools, especially at [NSC], I think people work all these hours, try to pay their tuition, and get tuition paid for. They go to work. They go to class. They go to bed. I think it's a routine (Victoria, p. 4)
4b	F/S Specific Challenges	Challenges associated with being in a F/S AND a commuter	But I do feel like I missed out on some things because it's like, "Well, if I take off work, then I'm not making monies. And if I'm not making money, then I can't pay my dues." So it's like, "Where is the give or take in what events that I can go to, and what events I kind of have to miss out on to work so I can afford to be in a sorority?" (Molly, p. 7)
5	Coping Strategies	Ways that the commuter students or their chapters mitigated the challenges faced by commuter students	After in Greek life a year or two, you just learn how to budget or manage that or just simply not get the T-shirt. You don't need three million t-shirts. (Jake, p. 7) [Sorority] events would be Thursday, Fridays, and Saturdays [but] I'm working Thursday, Friday, and Saturday nights so I couldn't go to events. That kind of stunk, so I ended up switching to babysitting (Nicole, p. 12)
5b	Development of Time Management	References to time management as a way to cope with challenges	
5c	Understanding Commitment	Participants understand the commitment they have (or will have) as members of a F/S, including the "self-efficacy" to make it work	We understand it (the event) is on a Saturday, or we understand it's on a Friday night…but this is a commitment when you join the sorority (Lys, p. 7) I made it happen because I was part of something that I cared about and I was passionate about. And when you care about something you'll make it happen no matter how difficult it is (Hope, p. 7)

Based on her feedback, I revised the coding frame to reflect four main themes, each with two to three sub-themes. This was process was helpful in clearly identifying the underlying structure, or *essence*, of the experience (Husserl, 1973, 2013; Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 1990).

I organized those themes and sub-themes into a final coding frame to code the data a fourth and final time. Four of the initial themes were retained as sub-themes, and one of the axial codes was shifted to be a sub-theme in the final coding frame. I renamed some of the themes and sub-themes in the process to represent the data more accurately. Figure 3.2 shows the development of the codes throughout the full coding process

Figure 3.2

Code Development



This last round of coding completed the fifth step of making connections across participants. The final step is to identify in which transcripts the themes occurred (Smith et al., 2009). Upon analysis, I found that all of the main themes occurred in each transcript. One transcript did not include one of the sub-themes. Even so, that sub-theme still exceeded the threshold of being present in at least fifty percent of the transcripts to be included in the final analysis (Smith et al.).

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness entails the measures which a qualitative researcher takes in order to ensure the findings are of high quality, and helps to instill confidence in the reader that the findings are worthy for consideration (Jones et al., 2014; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The components of trustworthiness I used in my study were *credibility*, *transferability*, *dependability*, and *confirmability*, and *reflexivity* (see Table 3.2). *Credibility* ensures that the data collected reflects the participants' experiences, which was accomplished using member-checking, sharing initial themes with the participants, and having an expert peer review the initial themes, descriptions, and associated quotes. *Transferability* refers to the extent to which findings from this study can be applied to other settings as determined by the reader. Purposefully selecting participants and using "thick description" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 316), by providing details about each participant and quotes to support findings, are the ways I worked toward transferability. *Dependability* is reflective of a rigorous research takes that allows others to follow their research process. In this study, I maintained a saved a copy of the coded transcripts (Lincoln & Guba). Finally, *reflexivity* is "the capacity of

Table 3.2

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness Component	Description	Method(s) for Establishment
Credibility	The extent to which the data collected and interpreted by the researcher aligns with the participants' experiences	Member-checking by sharing interview transcripts Share the initial themes related with participants Initial themes reviewed by expert peer
Transferability	Utilization of "thick description" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 316) so that readers can determine the extent to which the findings will apply to different contexts	Purposeful sample Provide details about each participant including information about their chapter, their commute methods and times, any positions they held, and selected social identities Quotes to support findings
Dependability	Ensuring a rigorous process of data collection	Initial protocol was tested and adjusted based on responses and feedback Ask the same questions to each participant
Confirmability	Allows researchers to follow one's process of data collection and interpretation	Audit trail of all research notes, raw data, and participant experience descriptions as described in the data analysis section
Reflexivity	How the researcher's experiences and positionality affect the research process and outcomes	Keep research notes about thoughts and reflections throughout Develop an *epoché*

the researcher to acknowledge how their own experiences and contexts…inform the research process" (Etheringon, 2004, pp. 31-32), which I engaged in through reflections in my research journal and developing an *epoché*.

Limitations

As with any study, a number of limitations were present and need to be identified. One is with the variety of institutions from which the participants were selected. Even though an institution's structures, policies, and student characteristics affect the student experience (Broido & Manning, 2002; Strange & Banning, 2001, 2015), those aspects of the institutions were not examined. Therefore, the experiences reported by the participants could have been shaped more by between-college differences than being a commuter and a member of a Greek-letter organization itself, and are likely to be different at institutions with a larger proportion of residential students.

Three limitations were also present due to the participant selection criteria. As I described in chapter two, the Greek-letter organization experience is complex, and even with a purposeful sample, a number of other organization-related factors that were not explored could have influenced the participants' experiences such as chapter size and organization type (i.e., historically White, multi/cultural, etc.; Garcia, 2019; Jabs, 2018). Second, commuter students can have complex living situations (Weiss, 2014), which was not taken into account in the participant recruitment and selection process. Therefore, other commuter students in Greek-letter organizations with different living or daily travel arrangements could have a different experience than the ones described by the participants in this study. This element could be particularly

influential for those commuter students who begin college living at home with their parents, join a Greek-letter organization, and end up moving to an apartment closer to campus with other chapter members, which was not the case for any of the participants in this study. The third limitation due to participant selection was that this study included only alumni. Therefore, those students who did not complete college, resigned or were expelled from their organization, or transferred to a primarily residential institution were not included and could have quite different experiences.

A third set of limitations relates to the participants' organization types and the recruitment process. The participants in the study were primarily from sororities, and while one was from a multicultural co-educational society, no participants were from specific culturally-based Greek-letter organizations, such as historically Black or Latinx fraternities and sororities, which could have lead to a different experience. Further, as DeBard and Sacks (2011) found, some of the offices I contacted did not maintain records of alumni, so the staff were limited in the number of alumni they could reach beyond their personal connections. Lastly, some of those who responded wanted to help but did not have relationships with any alumni because they had only been in their positions a short time, which is common for campus-based advisors (Koepsell & Stillman. 2016).

A final unexpected limitation based on the participants' characteristics that was that all held formal leadership positions. For any one chapter there are only a few positions that members can hold, which means only a small portion of members may ever hold positions. This is especially true for historically White Greek-letter organizations, like the ones most of the participants were a part, which tend to be

larger than culturally-based organizations (Ray, 2013). At the community level, the ratio of positions to all members is even smaller, yet five of the nine participants in this study held such positions. These factors are important to note for the purposes of this study. To begin, chapter leaders feel a stronger sense of belonging than general chapter member (Long & Snowden, 2011), therefore, it should not be surprising that the participants achieved a sense of belonging in their chapters, even though it fluctuated. Further, there could be a dynamic between belonging, fit, and holding positions. The participants discussed having the freedom to be authentic and accepted for it as a part of feeling like they belonged in their chapters. It could be, however, that their authenticities were more accepted than others', and was rewarded organizationally by placing them in a better position to be elected to leadership positions based on who they were, rather than the skillset they held. Therefore, the findings may have been different if participants who did not hold leadership positions were included.

Related to these points is that perhaps one reason why the participants generally reported having a good experience was because of belonging resulting from personal congruence with the chapter. Indeed, two of the exclusion criteria – those who left either their institution or their chapter – can be associated with sense of belonging (i.e., Strayhorn, 2012, 2019). Therefore, students who felt like they did not belong in their chapters or at their institution may have left one or both, and would not have been able to be included. Even if they did not leave their chapters, members may have felt a lesser sense of belonging than others because they either were not as accepted or did not feel like they could be as authentic as others. Having that kind of

experience in one's chapter might be painful to recall and could explain why some potential participants I contacted who met the criteria chose not to participate.

While the purpose of qualitative research is to explore a specific phenomenon deeply rather than produce findings that are generalizable to a population, the findings still only represent the lived experiences of nine people. As I outlined in this section, a number of other factors associated personal, organizational, and institutional characteristics as well as unexplored and varied personal experiences could have influenced the p under study. Due to this reality, readers should be cautious when considering the findings and implications in the following chapters.

Chapter Summary

Chapters one and two provided an introduction, background, and rationale for the study, and this chapter described the process by which I executed the research. A description of constructionism and sense of belonging as my theoretical and conceptual frameworks provided a description of my research paradigm and approach. My background was described by articulating my positionality as a fraternity member and Greek-letter organization advisor, while my *epoché* dove deeper into some of the assumptions and understandings related to the study. I then provided a brief description about phenomenology, and the tenets of IPA gave a background to the research method, which was later followed by a description of the data collection and analysis process. Between those sections I described and rationalized the process of identifying institutions and participants for the study. Finally, I concluded the chapter with the trustworthiness measures I used, and the limitations associated with the research design and process. While somewhat tedious, a thorough description of these

components is necessary to affirm the reader about the study's rigor and the worthiness of the findings, the latter of which will be the subject of the next chapter.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

Using sense of belonging as a conceptual lens, the purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of commuter students in Greek-letter organizations at primarily commuter public institutions. There are four research questions. The primary question is: *How do alumni who were commuter students and members of Greek-letter organizations at primarily commuter public institutions describe their member experience?* The secondary research questions are: (1) *What comprised the experience of belonging for these alumni?* (2) *What, if anything, lead to or detracted from their sense of belonging?* And (3) *how, if at all, did their membership contribute to their sense of belonging on campus?*

To answer these questions, I conducted semi-structured interviews with nine participants. I then analyzed the data using interpretive phenomenological analysis, which is a type of phenomenology that seeks to understand how people make sense of their experiences (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Four main themes, each with sub-themes, emerged from the data analysis: (1) seeking to belong, (2) personal connections, (3) welcoming and accepting members, and (4) belonging beyond the chapter. Each will be discussed in turn.

Seeking to Belong

In his foundational work on human motivation, Maslow (1970) described belonging as a need one seeks once more basic needs, such as food and safety, have been met, and is necessary when one finds themself in a new environment. According

to Maslow, the process for meeting human needs, including developing a sense of belonging, is a "means to an end rather than an ends in themselves" (p. 21). In other words, people do not work to meet these needs for the sake of having them met, but rather are driven to meet these needs as a way to feel fulfilled. Drawing from Maslow's work, Strayhorn (2012, 2019) argued that the need to develop a sense of belonging in college is strong enough to influence a student's behaviors. Therefore, individuals will seek out environments, including student organizations, as a way to feel a sense of belonging, but they may not articulate "belonging" as a reason for joining them. Even though commuter students may still live at home, as most in this study did, by attending college they are interacting in a new environment among a new group of people, and it is important that they develop a sense of belonging (Jacoby, 2000b).

In line with Maslow (1970) and Strayhorn's (2012, 2019) assertions, participants did not discuss joining a Greek-letter organization explicitly as a way to belong. Instead, they described the isolation they experienced when they first started college, which was having a negative effect on their experience. Most participants went to campus and knew few, if any, other students, and found they spent much of their time alone. While most did not intend to join a Greek-letter organization, or even knew much about them, they found membership to be a way they could change the experience they were having. As commuters, however, they still had challenges of "typical" commuter students, and had to engage in strategies to overcome those obstacles in order to actively participate in their organizations.

Experience Prior to Joining

Joining a Greek-letter organization was the first activity most participants became involved in at college. Prior to joining, they generally spent time by themselves with few interactions with other students on campus. While KW and Lys were hired as orientation leaders prior to joining Rho Sigma, that job did not begin until the end of their first year. Until that point, they were following a routine that was typical of the participants in their first semester, which included only minimal interactions with peers at their institutions, and not being interested in spending time on campus. Hope also described her first-semester experience in this way:

> I really didn't do much of anything…I had breaks in between my classes, and I would spend those breaks taking naps in my car. Didn't really go into the dining hall or anything like that because for one, I didn't know anyone, and two, just didn't really have the desire to. I really just spent my time going to classes, go to my car, go to classes, and then go home and then go to work.

Even though Jake joined Kappa Epsilon prior to his first semester at SSU and Kevin was involved in a campus leadership program his first semester at NSC, both speculated how their experiences would have been different had they not become involved. Specifically, they contrasted the way they experienced college compared to other commuter students, and described that experience similar to way Hope discussed her first-semester experience. At SSU, the experience Hope and others described was so pervasive that students had name for those commuters - "P.C.P." students:

> I probably would've been just what we call the P.C.P. student - parking lot, class, parking lot. You go to class and then you go home or go to work or

whatever. And I was lucky to have the ability to join a fraternity. I know not everyone can, due to other time commitments or having to work more. (Jake)

Nicole, who did not spend free time in her car, but rather tried to make connections with her peers, had a hard time doing so. She described herself as someone who had many friends in high school, but struggled socially when she first got to NSC. While she was able to reconnect with one person from orientation, her general difficulty with making friends caused her to withdraw from interacting with others:

> I would [go to campus] and be alone. Obviously, I was so accustomed to growing up and eating dinner with my parents, and having people to talk to, and people to spend my afternoon with. So here I am coming to college, and I'm not lying when I say this but some of the students at NSC are just so unfriendly. I would try and say, "Hi" to people in my class if I saw them outside (of the classroom) and they'd look at me like I had ten heads. So I was like, "Nope, not doing that anymore." So…I delved deeper into myself because I tried. I tried to make friends and I was getting rejected in different aspects of it. I was getting rejected by strangers in the dining hall, when I would ask, "Hey, is anyone sitting in this booth?" when there's no seats and they're just like, "Sorry, I want to eat alone." You're kind of just like, "All right, I'm going to go sit in the stairwell and cry by myself." So the opportunities that I tried to make friends all failed.

While spending time in one's car is helpful for commuter students because it is a space of their own where they can nap, charge their phones, and do homework

(Weiss, 2014), it does limit their ability to interact with others, which is essential to developing a sense of belonging (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Participants emphasized the importance of getting involved in some kind of student organization in order to meet other students, even if it is not a Greek-letter organization. This is consistent with other findings, which indicate that even though commuter students are still interested in getting involved in the college community even if they do not live on campus (Alfano & Eduljee, 2013; Clay, 2016; Kirk & Lewis, 2015). Even so, most participants were not intending on joining a Greek-letter organization when they started college. Some, however, sought it out as a way to shape their experiences. Dustin, for example, joined Kappa Rho at the beginning of his first semester at NSC, and did so because he wanted a different experience from the one he had in the three high schools he attended:

> I didn't really get involved in high school. I joined the football team in freshman year of one of my high schools, and then dropped before the season started because family priorities, raising an infant sister. So my brothers did their thing, and I took responsibilities at home. So I thought it would be fun. I wanted to join something and get involved.

Similarly, Victoria, Hope, and Nicole were actively looking to change the experience they were having at college. Both Victoria and Hope were looking for activities in which to participate:

> And there's nothing to do at NSC. If it was a bigger school and they had something going on every day, maybe I would live on campus. But I think I came to NSC because I didn't have to live on campus…I don't know if

> anybody else feels that way but I think outside of Greek life, or outside of other organizations, there's not much to do. (Victoria)
>
> I literally saw on Twitter about continuous open bidding for sororities, and I was just like, "Screw it, might as well do it"…I was just like, "Wow. It's been so boring here. I don't really have friends here because all my friends go to [State U.]. This kind of sucks." (Hope)

Even though both described having something to do as the reason for being interested in joining their sororities, it is unlikely that no other activities occurred. Both Hope and Victoria indicated they spent much of their free time alone either in their car or in common areas. Therefore, either activities were not occurring at times that were convenient for them (Kirk & Lewis, 2015), the activities were not of interest, or they did not feel like they had anyone with whom they could attend. Unlike the other participants, Nicole had been interested in joining a sorority prior to starting college. She, however, had to attend NSC due to financial reasons and family obligations. She did not realize her college had sororities until she arrived on campus, but was excited when she discovered it was an option:

> I knew that there was this whole world that even though it's not like it is in the movies, but it's this whole world that movies create and you see on TV shows. And you see all these girls that are friends. And when I was little, I saw that. And I would tell my family. I was like, "I'm going to be in one of those when I was older." And my parents were like, "Whatever." But when I saw it on campus, and I saw it in real life, it was kind of crazy to me. And I was like, "Oh my God. I didn't realize NSC had Greek life." It wasn't something that was

expressed at my orientation, actually, because I don't think Greek life was as major (then).

One interesting finding is that when the participants described the experiences they had in their chapters, very little of it entailed going to parties, and no participants indicated attending parties as a reason for joining. When they did talk about parties and drinking, they contrasted it to the local, larger, primarily residential state universities, which they used as a reference point for their experiences. As Hope described, the experience was more "low-key," and Jake contrasted his experience from the debauchery exhibited by fraternity members in the film, *Animal House* (Landis, 1978):

> And then [at State U.] are all the parties that were kind of not my speed since we didn't have houses on campus, we didn't really have the opportunity to have those kinds of parties, at least on campus. So it was kind of just like a different speed. It's a lot easier to go to a mixer that's in the (college) ballroom, where it's just kind of low key because we can't do anything too crazy here other than to go to a mixer at the frat house down the street. That's just loud and obnoxious and you never know if it's going to get busted…I mean when you think about how Greek life is depicted in movies and books and TV shows or even at big colleges it's so different here. (Hope)
>
> I mean, I did, of course, expect the social aspect, and that was a reality. Of course, I came out with people - drinking underage - that kind of stuff. But it wasn't like *Animal House* or anything like that. But I knew my friends at [State U.] and [City U.] certainly had different experiences. (Jake)

Prior research has found that students who join Greek-letter organizations, largely through self-selected participation, are more likely to have drank in high school than those who do not join, which suggests that students who drink more may seek out Greek-letter organizations in college (Bowman & Holmes, 2017; Routon & Walker, 2014). Further, findings about members' drinking behaviors prior and during college are even more pronounced for those who live in Greek-letter organization housing (Wechsler, Kuh, & Davenport, 1996). Certainly not all students join Greek-letter organizations to attend parties, even at residential institutions, and while not absent from the experience, attending parties and going to bars was not a reason the participants sought out their organizations, nor was it central to their experience once they became members. As the participants' description of their experiences suggest, their motivations to join were to change their relatively isolated experiences. In other words, their motivation was to belong.

Knowledge of Greek-Letter Organizations

The participants did not have a lot of exposure to Greek-letter organizations prior to joining, other than the media, like Nicole and Jake indicated in the previous section. Victoria hypothesized that students steered away from Greek-letter organizations because of "stereotypes…[like] hazing…or blackout stories or going to parties." For KW, who was a Black woman in a nationally predominantly White sorority, her initial concerns were about the diversity of the chapter, but was pleasantly surprised when she met the members:

> I kind of still had that image of it and the stereotypical party all the time, blonde hair, blue-eyed girls. So, I'm like, "I don't really think I would want to

> do it." But then I talked to some girls who were already in Rho Sigma, and they were just talking about - and one thing really attracted me was how diverse all those girls were. They were different shapes, different sizes, and different backgrounds. So, that's what really attracted me to Rho Sigma, was the diversity of that sorority.

Additionally, the participants were unsure of what Greek-letter organizations actually did. Even Lys, who had family members who were affiliated with Greek-letter organizations, was unclear about the expectations, commitment, and academic requirements. Like all the other participants, Jake did not have affiliated family members. He was not aware of the time, finances, and decisions that are part of membership. Furthermore, because he was recruited so early in his college career, he was unsure of which fraternity he joined in the first place:

> It was weird because at the time, there was still Kappa Epsilon and Kappa Upsilon and I couldn't remember which one I had joined [laughter]. So it shows you how I couldn't even understand the Greek letters. So I knew nothing. And then for me it was just like, "Okay, these guys are fun and cool to hang out with." And little did I know the financial or time commitment, but that itself got worked out later, of course…and I remember [voting] being explained to me my first semester. And I was like, "Okay." I was like, "What do we even vote on?" [laughter] Again, I was like, "What? . . . Did I join the Senate? I don't know what's happening."

Clearly, the participants did not have accurate perception of what it meant to be a member of a Greek-letter organization prior to joining. This is not surprising,

considering only Lys indicated that she had family members who were members of Greek-letter organizations, and even she was not sure of the expectations regarding sororities. This characteristic of the participants is important, because there is cultural capital associated with having family members who ae also members of Greek-letter organizations (Park, 2012). Not only does that capital help students understand the experience once they are members, but it also informs potentially interested students that joining a Greek-letter organization is a way to access alumni networks to enhance their future careers (Hetchinger, 2017; Syrett, 2009), which may be a motivator to join. While it is true that joining a Greek-letter organization links students into national and international networks, and this may be a reason that some students join, it did not seem to be the case for these participants. Even for Lys, who was connected to her first job out of college through a chapter alumna, did not join for that benefit. The participants joined, again, because they were looking for a group to which they could belong.

Challenges and Overcoming Obstacles

Even though there is no one type of commuter student (Jacoby, 2000b), the participants in this study in some ways mirrored the literature on commuter student characteristics, and in other ways did not. For example, while all of the participants worked and traveled to campus (Gefen & Fish, 2013; Kirk & Lewis, 2015), only Nicole was responsible for caring for others (Burlison, 2015; Jacoby, 2000b; Wilmes & Quade, 1986), and only Jake, Kevin, and Nicole indicated the experiences associated with being a commuter caused them stress (Gefen & Fish). Similarly, all but two were traditionally-aged college students, most were White, and only two self-

identified as first-generation college students, which differs from national quantitative studies that collected demographic information about commuter students (Graham, Socorro Hurtado, & Gonyea, 2018; Kuh, Gonyea, & Palmer, 2001). As commuters, however, they still faced challenges and found ways to overcome them in order to participate in their organizations.

Challenges. One of the most significant challenges faced by the participants was the need to work. All of the participants worked from 15 to over 30 hours per week, which could have a negative effect of belonging based on the time available to spend with peers (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Bowman, Jarratt, Jang, & Bono, 2019). For the participants, however, this was not a choice. Most participants chose to commute for financial reasons and were responsible for paying their membership dues, which ended up resulting in some participants occasionally missing events and limited the time they could spend with other chapter members:

> It was definitely hard because I had to work with my work schedule. And I have to be like, I had to request it off. And sometimes, although I had seniority, it wasn't always approved. And I'd have to miss some events, or I would have to come straight from work. (Lys)

As Armstrong and Hamilton (2013) described, however, the costs associated with membership in a Greek-letter organization is more than just dues. There are initiation fees, and costs associated with buying event tickets and outfits. As someone who had to pay for all of these fees himself, as well as other expenses such as gas to get to campus and food during his prolonged days there, the costs associated with membership were stressful for Jake. He even opened a credit card in order to join

Kappa Epsilon, which he later regretted. Even so, he considers himself "lucky" to be able to afford these costs, because he knew some of his other commuting peers were prohibited from joining Greek-letter organizations because of them:

> I think at first I was really kind of nervous, too, about how I was going to pay because I had to pay like $300 up front to Kappa Epsilon's headquarters, and for me I was just fresh out of high school. [I thought,] "When am I ever going to have $300 in my bank account and enough left over to pay whatever?" So I had put that on a credit card that I had opened, which ended up being an awful decision…I mean, my parents did not pay for it (my fraternity). I did myself…[I was] lucky to be in a situation where the finances didn't really affect me that much. But there were times where it was stressful because not only am I paying dues, I am also having to pay for gas, pay for food…being on campus all day, I'm going to need to eat lunch, dinner, whatever. And [the costs of] the formals, the t-shirts, the philanthropies. That definitely was a little bit of a strain.

In addition to working, travel and time were a challenge for the participants. While most participants drove themselves to campus, some took alternative forms of transportation for at least part of the time they were in college. Molly, for example, took the train her first two years, which was not problematic in itself; the challenge came when events went late at night and she did not feel safe walking to train alone. The rest of the participants, with the exception of Victoria, who got a ride whenever she needed on from her parents, also talked about the challenge of attending chapter

functions, particularly because of their length and time. In this quote, Hope described the long days she experienced between her travel, classes, and chapter meetings:

> I lived 55 minutes away from campus if there was no traffic. So I remember such long [days], especially our chapter night, which was Wednesdays. If I had an 8:00 AM or a 10:00 AM (class), I would be there until 10:30 (at night)…sometimes midnight…because I wasn't going to drive an hour back home, and then an hour back here again. I didn't have that kind of money to waste on gas or that amount of time, so I would come, I would have my classes, be done with my classes by 4:00 and then I'd just be sitting on campus or going out with friends to waste time until chapter.

Hope's comment about waiting on campus was not unique to her experience. Traveling to and from campus was time-consuming for most of the participants, especially for her, who had one of the longest commute times. Weiss (2014) found that the commuter students in her study also spent time waiting in between classes and events. Like the participants in Weiss' study, some of the participants in this study used this time to do homework, but also used the time to spend with other chapter members. Hope also ended up using some of that time to schedule meetings, and Dustin used his free time to engage in activities and take up fraternity office hours, to ultimately "make the most of [his] time on campus."

Overcoming obstacles. The amount of time a student spends in an organization influences their sense of belonging (Bowman et al., 2019). As Hope and Dustin indicated, participants found ways to overcome their obstacles in order to remain active members and maximize their time as participants. One way was to

arrange their work or class schedules, and in some cases both, to increase the time they could be on campus and accommodate the activities involved with their organizations. For example, while Nicole had to work, she only took jobs what would allow her to participant in Alpha Gamma:

> I ended up going back and forth between a couple of jobs in college just because of hours, and I was waitressing at one point and Alpha Gamma events would be Thursday, Friday, Saturday, and I'm working Thursday, Friday, Saturday nights, so I couldn't go to events. That kind of stunk so I ended up switching to babysitting. I worked way more actually with the babysitting but what I did was kind of staggered my classes so I would have a break from 12:00 to 4:00 and that's when I would babysit while the mom was at work.

Jake, Molly, and Kevin also adjusted their work situations, but instead of changing jobs off campus, they replaced them with jobs on campus. Both Molly and Kevin discussed the benefits of working on-campus jobs. Molly was able to take a position in ECU's Fraternity and Sorority Life Office, whose staff members were more understanding and accommodating of her changing her schedule for sorority-related events than her off-campus job. Similarly, Kevin had more flexibility when he worked in NSC's Student Activities Office than when he worked at a factory. At NSC, he could step away from his work or members could come meet him in his office, both of which were not a possibility in his factory job:

> I was on campus more. So if a member needed to bring me dues, it wasn't a big deal to set up a time and place where we can meet on a day that I just happen to be on campus. They can just come by the office and give me their dues.

> Generally, the scheduling [for that job was] very flexible and yeah, I think it was just more easily to access for the other members.

It is important to note, however, that the connections Jake, Molly, and Kevin had made through their involvement helped them become aware of and secure their on-campus jobs. This is not surprising. Manley Lima (2014) found that connections with college faculty, staff, and administrators were one of the benefits commuter students gained from their involvement. While she was primarily discussing these connections resulting from campus employment, she also noted that her sample of commuter students made connections the way these participants did – through involvement in student organizations.

Some of the participants noted the importance of time management in order to balance all of their competing responsibilities. Developing this skill is consistent with one of Clay's (2016) findings in his study of involved commuter students. This is not to suggest that developing time management skills is not important for residential students, but the combination of travel and needing to work while engaging in involvement activities makes it especially important for commuters. Dustin clearly articulated this point when he said:

> Being someone whose primary mode of transit was my feet, I had to engage in some serious time management and pick and choose what I was going to do that week. There might have been this one event that I really needed to go to, and really wanted to go to, but I also have to make sure [I get to] my class on time, make sure I get to and from work on time. Staying that extra five minutes at an event might have meant that I was 15 minutes late for work if I didn't

> plan out my route well enough…[because] I would have missed the bus or because I wouldn't have made it in time.

Part of time management included planning ahead. Weiss (2014) found that her participants had to make sure they had everything they needed for the day before they left their homes for the day. That experience was similar to the participants in this study, particularly when they had to prepare for chapter events. In this quote, Molly discussed how she needed to plan for all aspects of her day including food, class materials, and a chapter recruitment event:

> It's like, "Okay, I'm getting here for my 8:00 AM class. I don't have time to go home [before recruitment]." So then I'm also packing a bag because I have to wear my recruitment stuff to my recruitment event. And it's just a hard shuffle to get it all done…And then it's like, if I don't have breaks throughout the day, when is their time to do homework at that point? Because with adding in the commute, while it wasn't always a long time, it could've been time used elsewhere. And I think too that also goes for not only homework, but food. So it's like, "Am I going to buy all of my meals today because I'm on campus for 12 hours? Or am I going to figure out how to pack food for all of those meals and figure out where to heat it up? And what to do with that."

A third way that participants overcame their obstacles was by relying on other chapter members. Dustin, for example, lived close to campus but did not have a car, so he would rely on other chapter members to drive him home when he had to be on campus after the bus stopped running. Many participants also talked about how they spent time with other members between classes and events while they were on

campus. Finally, participants who lived farther away from campus often stayed with other chapter members who lived on or near campus when events went late:

> A lot of sisters would open up either their off-campus homes or residence hall (rooms)…so it's, "Oh, if somebody needs to stay here because you have a far commute and you have to be at class early I'll open up my space for you to stay here." (Molly)

The various methods that participants used to overcome the obstacles they faced as commuter students was essential for them to balance all of their responsibilities and maintain their membership. Some, like Hope, described overcoming obstacles as a responsibility she took on when joining the sorority and then leadership roles in the organization. Even though they all faced challenges as commuter students, some of the participants attributed the limited participation of other members to a lack of motivation. Their thoughts were similar to the participants in Clay's (2016) study, who felt that they, the involved commuter students, were motivated, while other commuter students were not.

While a lack of motivation may be the case for some, this interpretation of the experience also centers the barrier as an individual deficit, rather than focusing on external situational and structural factors. The need to work, caring for others, limited time (Burlison, 2015; Jacoby, 2000b; Wilmes & Quade, 1986), and traveling to campus (Gefen & Fish, 2013; Kirk & Lewis, 2015) influence the commuter student experience, and therefore, the experience in Greek-letter organizations. Meanwhile, the experience in these organizations, like the college experience in general (Attewell & Lavin, 2012; Jacoby, 2015), does not necessarily consider these factors because the

experience is typically designed for residential students. Some of the participants, however, recognized that their experience as commuters was less difficult than the experience some of their peers had. For example, KW did not have to travel as far as some of her chapter sisters, Victoria was able to get rides whenever she needed them, and Jake lived close to campus and had reliable transportation:

> I was lucky to be in a situation where I had a good car that could get to and from campus, no problem. So for me, personally, I don't think really I faced that many challenges being a commuter, because if they needed me to be on campus, I could be there again as quick I need, as fast I needed to be.

Hope's description of her sorority little sister's experience is a good example of the effects of external factors. Even though she wanted to be actively engaged in the sorority and she tried hard, there were other factors in her life that prevented her from participating fully, which, ultimately, resulted in her decision to leave Pi Gamma:

> The reason that she left was due to an illness in the family. There was a lot of talk of moving. There was a lot of getting bounced around, and it was taking a toll on her academics too. So I think she just eventually she just had too many eggs in her basket and had to take a step back from something, and if it couldn't be her family and it couldn't be academics, it had to be [the sorority].

An important facet to note, however, is that as commuter students who had to spend time working and traveling to campus in addition to focusing on their academics, the participants were value-conscious of both time and money. Dustin and Nicole were conscious about choosing a Greek-letter organization over other student organizations to join because their membership in their Greek-letter organizations was

more meaningful than what they could get from other groups. Similarly, Lys, Hope, Kevin, and Molly were conscious about the perceived value of an event compared with the time it takes to travel to campus, which is one of Kirk and Lewis' (2015) arguments. Molly discussed the value of time regarding events her institution held for all Greek-letter organizations:

> If you're bringing a speaker to campus and you want eighty percent of the chapters there, you need to do that and have that planned way in advance so you could let people know. But I think even still then knowing that that's not a valuable thing for everybody. So again, if I have to commute an hour and a half to see this speaker that's probably not on my to-do list. That's not going to be on the top of the things that I need to come back to campus for.

Finally, Nicole and Victoria were sensitive to the amount of money they were paying directly to their chapters through membership dues, and indirectly to their headquarters through the bills their chapters paid, so they wanted to ensure they were having a good experience.

Theme Summary

Membership in Greek-letter organizations has been found to help students develop a sense of belonging (Cohen, McCreary, & Schutts, 2017; McCreary & Schutts, 2015). Even though they had limited knowledge about Greek-letter organizations before they joined, the participants looked to membership as a way to improve their college experience by meeting other people and developing a sense of belonging at their institutions. The belonging they were seeking, however, was not to a

specific group for the purposes of networking or access to parties, but rather to the larger college environment.

As commuter students, the participants still had obstacles, primarily the need to work, traveling to campus, and managing time, which have also been articulated elsewhere in the literature (Burlison, 2015; Jacoby, 2000b; Wilmes & Quade, 1986). The participants employed a number of strategies to overcome these obstacles, such as rearranging their schedules, taking jobs on campus, and relying on their fellow chapter members. Since joining Greek-letter organizations allowed for the participants to feel like they belonged, these strategies are examples of Strayhorn's (2012, 2019) assertion that students engage in specific behaviors in order to develop a sense of belonging. Finally, because of their personal and membership obligations, the participants tended to be conscious of their time and money, so they expected chapter events and costs to be worth the use of their resources.

Personal Connections

Personal connections were important for the participants in the recruitment process, through their undergraduate membership, and now as alumni. Many participants either had or made individual connections with members of Greek-letter organizations prior to joining. Once they were members, having a small group of friends was important for their sense of belonging within the chapter. Finally, some of the friendships they made as undergraduate members have continued as alumni.

Recruitment Connections

Most participants joined their organization, in part, because they knew or met a peer in a Greek-letter organization, or they went with a peer they knew to a

recruitment event. Who those peers were, and how they met them, however, varied: KW and Lys were orientation leaders with other members of Rho Sigma before they joined; Hope recognized the person promoting a recruitment event from high school; Jake had an older friend who was in a sorority at SSU; Kevin made friends in a campus leadership program with whom he started Beta Lambda; Molly made friends who ended up joining Lambda Pi; Nicole reconnected with a student she met at orientation with whom she attended a recruitment event; and Victoria was convinced to go to a recruitment event with a friend from high school. This finding is unsurprising considering decades of research have found that a student's peers are the most influence group of people with whom college students interact (Mayhew et al., 2016; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Molly, for example, was not considering joining a sorority, but that changed when she made friends with a group of women who joined Lambda Pi:

> I wasn't (thinking about joining a sorority) before I went to school. I wasn't even (thinking about it in) my first semester. I don't even recall kind of seeing them or meeting them. But once I had my three friends in college and they all joined and I was like, "Well, now what do I do? You're all busy with this stuff and while you're still my friend, this trumps what anything that we're doing."...But it definitely wasn't something that ever crossed my mind until my friends did it first.

While peers are an important factor in the general higher education literature, the literature for commuter students specifically has focused on the importance of college employees, especially faculty, as conduits to the rest of campus (Krause, 2007;

Manley Lima, 2014). It is unclear whether or not faculty or staff encouraged those who were involved with another activity prior to joining their organization had a role in recommending a Greek-letter organization, or in Dustin's case, attend NSC's activities fair, where he met the Kappa Rho men. The peers that connected Jake, Victoria, and Hope, however, were people they knew from high school. The influence of this specific set of peers generally has not been explored the higher education literature. If anything, the foundational literature on persistence recommends detaching from high school friends (Tinto, 1987, 1993), although that recommendation has been refuted (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). For incoming commuter students, however, knowing people from high school could be, as was demonstrated here, a way to connect with others when they may not know any other students.

Furthermore, it is important that commuter students have the opportunity to connect with one another (Gefen & Fish, 2013; Pokorny, Holley, & Kane, 2017). When considering joining their sororities, KW and Molly found it helpful to know that other members commuted as well. KW, for instance, was concerned that commuting would be held again her and detract from her experience. Interacting with a member who commuted was helpful to assuage her fears and provided her suggestions about how to manage commuting, work, and her membership:

> I was asking her, "Is there rules against commuting? How's it like being a commuter student within a sorority?" And she was just basically telling her strategies of it - kind of planning things, making sure her work schedules flexible around it because she also worked at Oceanside too. And especially [since] she was telling me she's not the only commuter - there's other girls who

> commute too. There's always people who commute and, there's definitely a way to still be involved with the sorority even if you do commute.

The importance of students finding others with similar experiences is important for developing a sense of belonging (e.g., Strayhorn, 2012; Means & Pyne, 2017; Stapleton & Nicolazzo, 2019; Vaccaro & Newman, 2016). While this will be discussed in more depth within the next theme, it is evident that for at least KW and Molly, having other commuter students in the chapter was helpful.

Situating Oneself in the Chapter

All of the participants described having a group of friends within the chapter as essential to feeling like they belonged. Hope described this aspect of belonging best. For her, she relied on a core group of members with whom she was closest:

> But having even within the bigger organization, like a smaller network of people that you could truly count on was really important to me. And then outside of them having more sisters that you could count on, but mostly having those few people inside that were very close to you and very important to you, and you always knew where you're going to be a serious support because you can't expect to get along with 35, 40 people all at once. But if you have those three or four that are in your immediate (sorority) family that are there to support you, then you can make it through the rest.

Jabs' (2018) study on the experience of sisterhood based on sorority chapter size also found that these smaller networks of friends were important for her participants' sense of belonging, regardless of the number of members in the chapter. She also found that for some of her participants, those other members in one's chapter

family served as some of those close friends. Dustin, Nicole, Jake, and Kevin, in addition to Hope, all noted that those in their organization families were some of the people that added to their belonging in their chapters.

If everyone has their own group of friends, then logically a chapter would be made up of multiple sub-groups. Indeed, most of the participants noted that their chapters had these groups, which the participants typically defined as “cliques.” These sub-groups were not inherently bad, but became problematic in terms of their sense of belonging in two instances: (1) when a participant’s closest friends were parts of various sub-groups, or (2) when there was in-fighting between the groups:

> I feel there's definitely times where I felt I didn't belong. But I feel like that is in the cliques that come within a chapter. So I feel I was somebody who was friends at times with different people who were in their cliques but then it was like, "Oh, well I'm not invited because I'm not a part of this friend group in the chapter, but we're friends but I'm not friends with these people.” (Molly)
>
> So our chapter went through a really, really, rough period, kind of with cliques in a sense. This was just like toxic - brothers hanging out with each other, but not all being included. And I think it was something that just happens when your chapter becomes bigger. Because our chapter got up to like 99, I think, my sophomore year, which was really large at the time. And it was not like that when I graduated, and I think that shows partially why. But it got to the point that the cliques kind of became - they would almost fight with each other. And it was like they would kind of create strategies about how to get on the executive board and all that kind of stuff. And I was like what? I was like, "It's

not that deep, y'all." I was always kind of - I don't want to say a floater - but I got along with so many different people in the chapter that I never really was in a clique because I didn't care to be, I guess. I don't know. It wasn't something that I was looking for. And so I was like, “If everyone's fighting with each other, why am I in this chapter? What's the point if they're not all going to be brothers?” And I guess, I took the idea of being a brother differently, but I mean, it's natural to gravitate towards certain people. But the chapter really felt divided. And since I didn't - and I didn't felt I was really strongly on any of the sides that I was like, “What's the point of this, if the chapters just going to fight and fight for power?” (Jake)

Jake’s description of how his chapter size changed over time suggests an effect of the fighting. He described how the chapter grew to nearly a hundred members, but then reduced in size afterwards. Jake attributed this change in size to the effects of the fighting between groups, which suggests that it reduced belonging and caused members to leave the chapter. A member leaving because they do not feel like they belong is not surprising considering the connection between belonging and persistence. Even though this is a Greek-letter organization chapter and not a college, the idea is the same – belonging is necessary for people to want to stay in a particular environment (Strayhorn, 2012, 2019). Lys, Kevin, and KW even tried to mitigate members leaving the chapter when they knew that others were having difficulty making friends. In this quote, Lys describes how she tried to reconnect a chapter sister. She ended up being unsuccessful, which made her feel “hurt”:

> And I would always try and go to them and try to comfort them and say, "Hey, you have people here. If anything you have me. You have your sisters here." And they'd be like, "Yes, sure. That's fine." They kind of brush us off or brush me off specifically and that kind of hurt, but I'd be like, "Okay. They're probably going through something. That's fine." And then they'd stop going to chapter meetings and I'd only see them in class and I would ask them I'm like, "Hey, Everything okay?" And they're like, "Ah, it's fine." And we'd go on our merry ways.

Connections as Alumni

The connections that participants made in their undergraduate careers carried through after graduation. All of the participants still had friends from their chapters who they see, or at least talk with, regularly. As an alumnus, Jake still finds personal and professional support from his chapter brothers:

> I think for me it was definitely just the friends that I still have, outside of my big and my little (fraternity brothers), too, like my other fraternity brothers that I'm still very, very close with and get to talk to and see whenever I'm home, and the fact that my fraternity brothers take a very genuine interest in my career, too, and I support them.

Just as positive feelings between members remained, however, negative ones lingered as well. Kevin started Beta Lambda with some of the friends he made in the leadership program he joined after he transferred to NSC, but the requirements of starting the organization put stressors on the otherwise strong friendships. While he

was pleased he joined Beta Lambda overall, this aspect of his experience made him question whether or not the membership was worth it:

> I don't know if it was definitely the best decision because most of the group was our prior group of friends already. And some of those friendships that were really good became so stressed that they'll probably never be the type of friendships they once were. So I think that is kind of a negative of it.

It should be noted, however, that even the participants farthest out from their collegiate careers graduated less than four years prior to the interviews. While life-long friendships are expected among Greek-letter organization members, DeSantis (2007) found that most alumni thought fondly of their fellow chapter members, but were rarely in contact with them. Of course, his study was done prior to the explosion of social media and other communication technologies, which may eventually alter the course for these participants. For example, while Jake referenced seeing his fraternity brothers when he went home, he indicated that he and his closest friends from his fraternity communicated daily through texting, which can facilitate regular and personal connections between people (Pettigrew, 2009).

Theme Summary

The findings in this section are supported by previous research that indicates peer relationships are important for belonging (e.g., Hausmann, Ye, Schofield, & Woods, 2009; Strayhorn, 2012, 2019). Manley Lima's (2014) study on commuter student involvement and belonging found that students and student organizations had the least effect on belonging. According to her findings, faculty, staff, and administrators had a much stronger effect on belonging for commuter students. Only

two of the participants in this study, however, referenced faculty or staff as having a positive influence on their belonging.

Further, simply joining a Greek-letter organization does not automatically contribute to a student's sense of belonging within the group. Like Jabs (2018) found for sorority women, belonging was, in part, dependent upon developing a group of friends within the chapter. The finding here, however, was inclusive of the fraternity and co-education society members in addition to the sorority members in this study. Bowman and his colleagues (2019) suggested a similar finding from their study on first-year student sense of belonging. While they found spending at least five hours a week participating in student organization activities predicted students' sense of belonging, the social connections a student had, presumably from participation, more strongly predicted belonging. Even though the researchers did not specify what type of organizations (i.e., Greek-letter or not), the importance of the social connections remains.

Welcoming and Accepting Members

Goodenow (1993) and Strayhorn (2012, 2019) use words like "welcomed" "accepted," and "included" in their definitions of belonging, and indeed, this was also reflected in the participants' descriptions. Beyond just their close friends, feeling welcomed and accepted by all members as a part of feeling like they belonged. Welcome and acceptance, however, was not a superficial concept. Belonging hinged on the participants feeling like they could be their "true" (Dustin) or "authentic" (Nicole) selves, which has also been found as important for belonging elsewhere in the literature (Vaccaro & Newman, 2016). Feeling like they were welcome and accepted

was also shaped by the extent to which policies and practices implemented by their chapters and national organizations supported their experiences as commuter students.

Feeling Accepted as a Chapter Member

Participants felt that it was important to be welcomed and accepted for who they were in their chapters. As with connections in the previous theme, feeling welcomed and accepted began during the recruitment process. Participants felt welcomed by the members in the organization, particularly by those they already knew. Further, the participants felt like the members of the chapters had a genuine interest in them as individuals:

> I will say, with Sigma Rho - the minute I went to one of their events I was literally walking up and a girl literally greets me so far away. I don't know how she knew I was going to the event. But she came up to me and she was like, "Hey, are you coming to the Sigma Rho event?" And I was like, "Yeah", and that made me feel welcome…And my guard literally from that moment kind of dropped and I always felt that I didn't have to be guarded or jaded or anything. (Lys)

Nicole also commented, however, that short recruitment periods, are somewhat superficial since there is a limited amount of time to get to know someone. She described how short recruitment models can be particularly challenging for commuters who may not have the opportunity to interact with the members outside of those events:

> They picked me so they should accept me for who I am, but during recruitment they only got to meet me for 30 minutes, so maybe they picked me for only the

> parts of me they thought they knew…and as a commuter student they don't get to see me in the dorms or in the cafeteria so that's the only time they get to know me.

Indeed, participants indicated that it was important for them to present what themselves in ways that were "authentic" (Nicole) or "true" (Dustin) to themselves in order to belong. Vaccaro and Newman (2016) described this as students being their "authentic selves" (p. 932) with the people with whom they associated and the groups of which they were a part. Hope, for example, felt that belonging included being able to share all aspects of her life with her sorority sisters, not just the ones related to her sorority experience:

> To feel like you're welcomed into a part of the community that accepts you for who you are and provides you with kind of an outlet where you can vent about anything that's going on, not even just within the organization that you belong to but a place where you feel comfortable bringing all your outside stuff to. So you can sit there and you can vent and talk about the things that are going on in your organization, but you can also - if you have stuff going on in your home life, in your personal life, in your school life, you're surrounded by a group of people that makes you feel comfortable, that you're supported to be able to talk about those things.

Dustin expressed a similar sentiment. He differentiated the relationship depth between his classmates and fraternity brothers, who he considered to be a "surrogate family," which was important to him since he moved away from family to attend college. The description of the quality of relationships members have with other

members compared with other people on campus has been found in other studies as well (DeSantis, 2007; Jabs, 2018; Syrett, 2009; Wessel & Salisbury, 2017), as has the connection between authenticity and belonging as a member of a Greek-letter organization (Cohen et al., 2017; McCreary & Schutts, 2015).

Authenticity involved the ability for members to "see" themselves as part of the organizations prior to joining. Part of seeing oneself referred to the general sense of how well they got along with the group members they met. Another part, however, related to aspects of their identities. The idea of students connecting with peers with whom they share social identities is prevalent in the literature on developing a sense of belonging (Means & Pyne, 2017; Orta, Murguia, & Cruz, 2019; Pokorny et al., 2017; Stapleton & Nicolazzo, 2019; Strayhorn, 2012; Tachine, Cabrera, & Yellow Bird, 2017; Vaccaro, Daly-Cano, & Newman, 2015; Vaccaro & Newman, 2016).

As previously described, KW and Molly found it helpful to know there were commuter students in their organizations. Their articulation of their discovery that commuter students could be active in Greek-letter organizations at their institutions aligns with the assertion that these organizations are typically associated with a residential experience (Heida, 1986). Indeed, one interesting finding from Weiss' (2014) study on commuter students was that they generally believed that on-campus activities, like Greek-letter organizations, were meant only for residential students. Kevin also expressed this belief when discussing commuter students' general perceptions of Greek-letter organizations:

> I would say the majority, I think, of people in fraternal organizations are residents but as a commuter, coming up the road maybe you'll see a bunch of

> fraternal organization members on [the residential] side of campus and you just kind of feel like it's not something for you, like, "Oh, that must just be a resident event or something for them."

Even though the chapters did recruit commuter students, and in some cases, many commuter students, their experiences were not always valued, which negatively influenced their sense of belonging. Kevin, for example, felt like he constantly had to explain to his other chapter members, most of who were residential students or lived close to campus, why he was hesitant to drive the 45 minutes back to campus for a late night meeting or short event. It was not until another member moved home near him and began commuting that he began to feel supported. Similarly, one of the reasons why Nicole commuted was to help her family take care of her brother with a disability, and she did not always feel supported by her chapter sisters:

> So it would kind of hurt my feelings a lot when, if we would do a safe circle or if we would do something and I'd be like, "Well, you girls know that I have a brother who's disabled [sic], and he's sick and no one checks in on me." And I'm like, "But I'm here to check in on you guys, and I do check in on you guys, and I ask you guys how you're doing, and I text you, and I reach out, but sometimes it's not reciprocated." Not to say that people didn't reach out to me, but the amount that I gave was so much more than the amount that I received. And that was kind of heartbreaking.

Nicole's anecdote is example of belonging occurring in degrees. Both Strayhorn (2012, 2019) and Goodenow (1993) include the terms "degree" and "extent," respectively, in their definitions of belonging. These terms indicate that

sense of belonging is not a binary experience. In this case, it was not that Nicole felt no support and, therefore, no belonging; rather, she felt she was giving a disproportional amount of support compared to what she was receiving, which reduced the level of belonging that she could have otherwise felt.

For Jake, Lys, and KW, who were members of sexually and racially minoritized groups, knowing that there were other members who shared their social identities was important for their sense of belonging. As in Vaccaro and Newman's (2017) study of sexually minoritized students, the participants clearly demarcated between feeling welcomed and accepted as an individual and feeling welcomed and accepted as a member of a specific social group. In his recruitment process, Jake came to know that Kappa Epsilon was an "open and accepting" of men with sexually minoritized identities. Similarly, both Lys and KW described their chapter as having women that looked different than their stereotypical image of "blonde hair, blue-eyed girls."

KW and Lys' experience contrasts Hughey's (2010) findings on the experiences of racially minoritized students in historically White Greek-letter organizations. He found that even that even though racially minoritized student are accepted into the organization, they are not always fully welcome because they are delegated specific tasks based on assumptions about their race, are tokenized, and experience discrimination. The difference seems to be that the participants in Hughey's study were members of historically White organizations that had predominantly White members. As Lys described, however, the chapter in which she and KW were members was quite diverse racially: "I felt like everyone was included

because everyone was so diverse. We didn't have the token African-American girl, or the token Asian girl, and, especially as a Hispanic woman, I felt like I was accepted for who I was." Further, her comments allude to the chapter providing a space for interactions between racially diverse students, which can increase sense of belonging, like it seemed to do for her and KW (Hausmann et al., 2009; Johnson et al., 2007; Maestas, Vaquera, & Zehr, 2007; Strayhorn, 2008).

Unfortunately, Jake did have a significant experience related to his sexual identity, which negatively influenced his belonging:

> There was a brother who, when I was on executive board, we did not get along very well. And I found out that he called me the F-word behind my back. And so for me, that was - it was definitely a brother that while we didn't always get along in the sense of the vision for the fraternity, we were always great outside of that. And so I was really upset and shocked about it…[and] he found out that I found out. So he had reached out and so we had talked in person. He apologized and I explained to him why what he said hurt me so much…especially coming from him. Because while we didn't get along, I thought there was always respect for each other…But the fact that we were able to work it out though, within a couple of days, I think helps. But then it kind of got to me and I was like, "Do other people feel this way?" If he's calling me this word, who did he say it to? And did they stop him? Do they agree with him? So that kind of got under my skin. But we talked about it and I was like, "I don't care who you said to, but I just hope you would talk to them too. And hopefully, you don't feel that way." But yeah, but that was tough.

While Jake identified himself as “lucky” for being a part of a chapter that had other gay members and was accepting of him, having this experience made him question his belonging within the entire group, which an indication of the complexity of individual- and group-level belonging (Vaccaro & Newman, 2017). Case, Hesp, and Eberly’s (2005) study on the coming out experiences of gay, lesbian, and bisexual Greek-letter organization members, however, found that experiencing homophobic remarks was common, even in accepting chapters. Specifically, they found that even though 85 percent of fraternity men received a “very” or “somewhat” supportive response to coming out at gay or bisexual to their chapters, half experienced hearing derogatory remarks or jokes in their chapters.

One of the elements in Jake’s anecdote that resounds with the responses from other participants is that a member called him a derogatory terms to other members when he was not present. Other participants also felt a reduced sense of belonging when others were speaking negatively about them when they were not present. Molly, for example, worked in the Fraternity and Sorority Life Office at ECU as a student with her best friend, who was an alumna chapter sister that worked at the college as the campus Greek-letter organization advisor. When Molly was nominated for a position that she did not get, others in the chapter thought she altered the election results:

> Because I was working there (the Fraternity and Sorority Life Office), it looked like myself and my best friend did all of that behind the scene stuff because I didn't get the position that I wanted. So then I was outcasted [sic] a little bit from my chapter…I definitely did not feel like I belonged. I felt like

> how could my sorority sisters, people who I'm supposed to call my sisters kind of put me in that place and think that I did all of those things when I had so much love for my chapter.

These experiences are somewhat similar to Jabs' (2018) finding that experiencing bullying reduced members' sense of belonging. It is unclear if the participants in these situations would define themselves as being "bullied," but these experiences included groups of members talking about them. In one instance, for example, Hope and the chapter president at the time were the only two people in the sorority not included in a group text message, because the chapter wanted to impeach the president and was unsure of how Hope felt about that decision as vice president. Jabs found one way her participants improved their situation was to move out of the chapter house in order to create physical and psychological distance from the chapter members bullying them. None of the participants in this study, however, had chapters with houses. Even though Jake's chapter had a floor in a residence hall, and some of the NSC chapters had offices, those spaces functioned differently than a chapter house, which centralizes much of the chapter experience. The only way the participants could create distance as commuter students may be to remove themselves from chapter activities, which also has a negative influence on sense of belonging in the chapter.

Chapter and National Organizations' Policies and Practices

Greek-letter organizations develop policies and practices to run their chapter operations, but are also subject to the policies and practices of the national organizations of which they are apart. Besides the literature on the differences between

organizational types (e.g., Torbenson, 2009), very little research has examined the way the chapter-level policies and practices have considered the influence the experience of chapter members (Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013; DeSantis, 2007), and even less about the policies and practices of national organizations (Zunick, 2017). In this study, however, it was evident that the policies and practices put forth by their chapters and national organizations influenced their experiences as commuter students.

In some ways, the policies and practices that chapters implemented assisted their commuter members. As reflected in the section above on commuter student challenges, participants were appreciative when chapters were able to accommodate their busy schedules, financial constraints, and the time they spent traveling to and from campus. In terms of policies and practices, these supports manifested when chapters allowed flexibility with chapter business like event attendance, meeting times, and dues payment schedules. Dustin, for example, found it helpful that he was able to use payment plan for his membership dues:

> We set up payment plans. They were very accommodating to some things…I had a very, very interesting financial [situation my] first three years, so being able to pay my dues was the top priority to remain a member every year. So every year required a new payment plan agreement. That way, it didn't affect the chapter as a whole as far as being in good standing with the national board.

Paying membership dues is one of the minimum requirements for maintaining membership in a Greek-letter organization. While the other requirements vary between chapters, the other minimum requirement often is attending chapter meetings, which typically occur weekly. For most participants, however, chapter meeting timing and

length was difficult. These meetings occurred either at night well after classes had ended, or on weekends, requiring the participants come back to campus to attend. Lys, however, noted that her chapter tried to make the meetings "fun," and when Hope was president, she tried to make meetings as efficient as possible, but found that challenging. She indicated that her chapter now tries to make every other meeting more fun by focusing on sisterhood events. Kevin's chapter also made changes to their meetings:

> Sometimes we would have meetings from 9:00 to 11:00 at night and, eventually, we ended up getting permission (from the national officers) to hold some of our meetings over Google Hangouts - but only some of them. There still were times when everybody had to meet in person. But in the beginning stages, they wanted us to have every meeting in person all the time and that was an extreme burden on me and the other commuter students.

Using Google Hangouts worked for Kevin's chapter in part because of its size. His chapter only had about 10 members. It is doubtful that Google Hangouts, or a similar platform, could work for larger chapters like Jake and Lys,' which at one point was nearly or over 100 members. Even if the platform could accommodate a large chapter, some of the participants expressed a tension between a chapter's flexibility and the commitment a student takes on when joining a Greek-letter organization. In this quote, Lys explains the tension using an example of Greek-letter organization community-wide events for philanthropic causes:

> The campus, the Greek life there, they do a very good job of trying to make it (events) on days that most people are there…we understand, we're human,

> we're people, we have lives outside of school. But we also want our Greek life members to understand that we're raising money for these organizations - for the Arthritis Foundation, for domestic violence. We're trying to raise money. So we want to make it fun, and we want to have this event, and we understand it's on a Saturday, or we understand it's on a Friday night, or whatever. But this is a commitment when you join the sorority.

Jake, however, commented (from his perspective of growing up attending Catholic school in the south), "there need to be more grace" when considering the balance of expectations with life situations. Indeed, there did seem to be a lot of "grace." Nearly all participants did not indicate receiving chapter sanctions for missing events, nor did they discuss using member sanctions as leverage for attendance. Nicole, however, did get sanctioned. Other chapter leaders tried to punish her by preventing her from going to their formal dance at the end of the year because she was missing events due to work. While she was the only one in this study who indicated potential sanctions a result of working, her experience was similar to some of the participants in Armstrong and Hamilton's (2013) study who also were sanctioned because they had to miss events due to work or were unable to pay the additional costs associated with events.

Molly's sorority recognized that external situations can affect one's membership, and therefore, had a membership status that was more conducive to the commuter student experience:

> I think our chapter, and even Lambda Pi as a whole, is good about early alumni and special status. So sisters are able to apply for special status. So if you are

> commuting from an hour and a half away, and you have two jobs, and you have something else, and you know you can't make it work that semester, you're able to apply for that and still be a part of the chapter and still be considered a part of the chapter without having to struggle to get it all done.

Molly's example is how policies from the national organization can influence the member experience. From the perspective of the participants, the national organization applied blanket policies that did not always support the commuter student experience. Jake, who volunteered at Kappa Epsilon's headquarters during graduate school, did not think commuter students were "on their radar," and if they were, the national organization staff did not talk about them. Even though some of the participants felt their national staff supported them by providing them the skills necessary to do their positions, none of the participants felt like the staff had a strong knowledge of the commuter student experience. Molly, Nicole, and Lys believed their chapters were not given as much attention as others due to a combination of being smaller, unhoused, and neither problematic nor exceptionally high-performing.

Below are two examples that illustrate some of the challenges chapters had with their organizations. It is important to note, however, that these are specific examples about which these two participants felt strongly. The first example is Hope's interactions with Gamma Pi's leadership consultants, who were employed by the national organization to assist chapters. Her chapter was responsible for paying for the visits, which happened at least once a year, and was a financial burden on the chapter:

> We had a budget for our hospitality chair, who was the person who was in charge of coordinating the LC (leadership consultant) visits…I'd say at least

> 90% of our hospitality budget every year went to the LC visit. And we would have to pay money to [house them]. At first, we were putting them up in a hotel, and that became ridiculously expensive because a hotel anywhere in this area for a week is nonsense…And especially since we're at a commuter school, we're a smaller chapter. That money's coming out of our pockets. We don't have a bigger fund for that. And especially since we don't have an alumni organization established or anything because we're so new, we really have no support for that money. So that kind of became difficult. And then when you add in the frustration of getting those negative reviews after, despite us paying literally thousands of dollars for her (the LC) to have a good experience, and just doing the best we can. For her to say, "Oh yeah, the food and the room sucked." It was just like, "Thanks. We tried." So that was the really the one thing that was frustrating with our national office.

For Hope and her chapter, it was not just that the visits were expensive, it was also that they did not perceive any empathy from the consultant that they did not have a chapter house or fiscally contributive alumni association to offset the costs, and therefore, it was more challenging to find and pay for accommodations. Jake's example of blanket policies was in regards to national awards. He felt that as an unhoused chapter at a primarily commuter institution, they had to work especially hard to compete with larger, housed chapters at primarily residential colleges and universities:

> I think a lot of times, when looking at [award] applications and stuff like that, it is a lot of times geared towards a lot of chapters who do have homes. And

> when you look at the chapters who are winning the [prominent awards], it's larger schools, more residential schools like University of Toledo, you think of Ohio State…[and other] big schools like Florida State, Virginia Tech, Iowa, and all that kind of stuff. And it was always kind of like, "Well, we're not those schools." So then it's almost like we have to work extra hard to prove ourselves, and that can sometimes be hard maybe without a house.

Dustin, however, who was involved with his fraternity on a national level, had a different perspective:

> As far as the National Board addressing, let's say, specifically NSC Greek life students, I don't think it's their place. Their job is to manage the politics and financials and litigations, and whatever else have you on the national level of business. They're not chapter-specific. They set the risk management policies. They set the guidelines. They set the standards. We have to meet them…I think that they do their best to accommodate the average student and that's all they can do.

Dustin is correct in that the national organization is responsible for the general oversight, policies, and accountability of all their chapters. From a social constructionist standpoint, however, Weinberg (2008) argued, “constructionism is about the recognition that things could be otherwise and that we might make them so” (p. 35). Blanket policies from the national organization and chapter, then, are just one way that the organization could operate. Alternatively, a Greek-letter organization could implement differentiated policies designed to support their chapters based on the

demographics of their membership or institutional type, including commuter students and primarily commuter institutions.

Theme Summary

Strange and Banning (2015) mused, "Being present may meet the technical requirement of inclusion, but experiencing a sense of belonging may require another standard" (p. 143). Indeed it does. Clearly, feeling welcomed was important as an individual for their sense of belonging, but like Vaccaro and Newman (2017) found, feeling like the social group to which one belonged to was important as well. While it was most prominent for students with minoritized social identities, it also extended to the entire group of participants as commuters. Authenticity also had an element of the degree to which participants could depend on their fellow chapter members to support them in their lives outside of the chapter.

Further, their belonging was influenced by the policies set forth by the chapter and the national organization. Strayhorn's (2012, 2019) definition of belonging includes, in part, as occurring within a specific environment. Just like the larger campus environment, those environments are influenced by the policies and practices of the organization (Strange & Banning, 2001, 2015). For members of Greek-letter organizations, the policies and practices do not just come from the institutions they attend, but also from their chapters and national organizations. The varying degrees to which those policies and practices support commuter students influences their ability to participate and thrive in their organizations. Just as an institution's policies and practices influence a student's sense of belonging, chapter and national organization

policies and practices influence commuter students' sense of belonging in their organizations.

Belonging Beyond the Chapter

As a result of their membership, the participants' sense of belonging in their chapters influenced their sense of belonging in the community of Greek-letter organizations and at their college or university. Belonging in those environments, however, occurred separately. The participants' feeling of belonging at their institutions was an extension of their belonging as a chapter member, whereas feeling like they belonging in the larger Greek community was primarily dependent on the relationships they made with members of other organizations. Finally, the connections some had as undergraduate members extended beyond graduation through formal connections with their organizations or as invested alumni.

Greek-Letter Organization Community

One of the unique aspects of joining a Greek-letter organization as opposed to other types of student organizations is that students also become part of the larger community encompassing all Greek-letter organizations on campus when they join their chapters (DeSantis, 2007; Matthews, Featherstone, Bluder, Gerling, Loge, & Messenger, 2009). For the participants, in addition to feeling a sense of belonging within their chapters, they felt like they belonged within their larger Greek-letter organization communities. Developing this sense of belonging was separate from the belonging they felt in their chapters and occurred largely through the process of making connections with individuals in other organizations:

> I mean, the sorority that I was part of, obviously, was a huge part of my time [at NSC], the entire four years that I was here. It was only one semester that I wasn't a member of the organization. But not even just that organization, just the Greek community as a whole. Every fraternity, every sorority, there are people that I made connections with, people that I were friends with, people that I worked with. It was all just a really awesome welcoming community. (Hope)

For Jake, simply being in a Greek-letter organization helped him make connections in classes. In this quote, he talks both about seeing other members of Greek-letter organizations in class as well as how he got involved in the larger community:

> Even if there was a fraternity or sorority member who I didn't share letters with, I'd walk into class and we'd be like, "Oh, yes. Let's sit by each other." So it's just like that instant weird connection, even where it's like, we know who each other are but we've never talked, but we are now because we're in class together. So just even small conversations like that, but then getting to meet a lot of people and other fraternities and sororities. I mean, through student government I met others who I became close with. I had three really good friends in [other fraternities and sororities] and at least one or two, or more than that in each one, but I mean the amount of connections and friendships I was able to make, and then through the different leadership organizations [like when] I became president of Order of Omega, the Honor Society.

Like Jake, all of the participants held leadership positions in their chapters, and five of the participants held leadership positions within the Greek-organization community. For example, Jake was president of the Order of Omega, an honor society for Greek-letter organizations leaders, was an officer on the Interfraternity Council, and was president of his chapter. Just as chapter officers feel a greater sense of belonging in their chapters than non-officers (Long & Snowden, 2011), members who hold leadership positions in their communities could feel a greater sense of belonging in their community than those who do not. Hope, for example, discussed how going on the annual retreat for chapter presidents and council leaders helped her meet other members in her community, which influenced her belonging in that environment. Therefore, those who do not have those opportunities because they hold either lower-level positions, or no positions at all, may not have such a strong sense of belonging at that level.

Also like at the chapter level, sense of belonging within the Greek-letter organization community occurs in degrees. While Jake knew multiple people in his organization, Kevin only knew a couple of people, and felt only weakly connected to the larger community at NSC. This could be because his organization was new, and so it had not established itself yet (DeSantis, 2007), or it could be that he was a member of a cultural organization, as opposed to the historically White organizations of which the others participants were members. Some research on culturally-based Greek-letter organizations has found that they are on the outskirts of the community and the historically White organizations sometimes are not even aware of their existence on campus (Garcia, 2019; Ray, 2013).

Institutional Belonging

In addition to the participants feeling like they belonged within the Greek-letter organization community, their membership also helped them feel like they belonged at their institutions. Unlike the belonging in the Greek-letter organization community, which was a separate process, belonging in the college community was an extension of participants' belonging in their organizations. For most participants, joining a Greek-letter organization changed their experience at their institutions. Belonging manifested in two ways. The first was that they spent more time on campus. Lys, for example, did not want to attend West Coast University, and initially did not like taking the time to go to campus when she did not need to be there. After joining Rho Sigma, however, she described it as no longer being a "chore" to go:

> So it made me want to be on campus, it wasn't a pain to go to campus. It wasn't a chore, it wasn't like, "Oh my gosh, I have to go to campus." It's like, "Oh, so and so's on campus. Okay, I'll be there." It was more so like I wanted to be more connected with the campus, I wanted to be more involved. There were sisters that were involved in other stuff, and they would have dance performances, and I would go see them. It wasn't a pain to go to campus as it used to be when I first started, when I first went to WCU, I was like, "Gross, I have to go to campus for class." And I would just go to class and then go home. There, when I was in the sorority, I stayed on campus a lot more to the point where my parents thought I was like, dead.

The drive that Lys and others expressed to be on campus is an example of fulfilling the human need to belong (Maslow, 1970; Strayhorn, 2012, 2019).

Interestingly, this finding contradicts previous assertions that commuter students are limited by the time they are able to spend on campus (Burlison, 2015; Jacoby, 2000b; Kirk & Lewis, 2015), and even some of the participants' own descriptions of their challenges outlined in the first section of this chapter. It could be that the majority of participants in this study did not have responsibilities besides school and work, although the hours they worked were substantial, so they had more discretionary time than commuter students in other studies did. Another possibility is that they were spending a similar amount of time on campus anyway, but now felt like they had things to do during that time, which also as was described in the first section. A third possibility is that it is a reflection of the participants' value-orientation toward their time – spending time on campus with the friends they made in their chapters was more valuable than spending the free time they had in other ways. After all, the dance performances and other events Lys references were happening anyway, she just now had a reason for attending, and people with whom she could attend. The value-orientation might even explain the apparent contraction in responses. Participants liked coming to campus in general, as long as it was for something worthwhile, which too long or short chapter functions at inconvenient times seemed not to be.

The second way belonging at their college or university manifested itself was the participants felt like they had places to go on campus besides their cars, or for those who spent time in common areas on campus, it was no longer time spent alone. These spaces varied by institution: most of the chapters at NSC were given an office; Lys and KW spent time in the fraternity and sorority life office; for Jake it was the various campus offices he became involved with at SSU as a result of his membership;

and Molly's chapter had specific couches in their student union lounge where sorority members would spend time during class. She even went to say, "You didn't sit on the couches unless you were in a sorority." Nicole shared that the spaces she went to, specifically the dining hall, changed from spaces where she would spend time alone to spaces where she felt like she belonged because she would see her sorority sisters there:

> I will say the sorority helped me find my sense of belonging on campus…I kind of went to school, class, had my lunch by myself, went home. Had my dinner by myself sometimes and went home. And so I joined and I went to class, saw some girls that I knew in the sorority, and they invited me to lunch. And then eventually, they kept inviting me to lunch. And if I had saw girls in there for dinner, they invited me to dinner. And so it made me realize all right, I can walk into the dining hall and I'm not going to be alone. I'm going to have a table that I belong to. I'm going to have an office on campus that I can go into in my free time and that's where I belong when I got my down time. Or I go to the library and I see girls - that's the table I belong at.

Having physical spaces for students to connect with one another is important, especially for specific groups of students like commuter students (Gefen & Fish, 2013; Pokorny et al., 2017). The participants in this study, however, either did not use those common spaces to connect with others, or did not go to them at all, until they joined their organizations. Campus environment theory asserts that the way spaces are designed and how those who use them make meaning of those spaces are two separate interactive constructs (Strange & Banning, 2001, 2015). Nicole and Molly's anecdotes

refer to this concept. They both went to the student union and dining hall, respectively, prior to joining their sororities, but those spaces took on new meaning for them once they joined their organizations and knew other people there.

For others, there were physical spaces designed by the intuitions to support the gathering and interaction of Greek-letter organization members, which can be an indication of the groups' importance. Strange and Banning (2001, 2015) discussed this concept in terms of cultural centers on campus. Not only do those physical spaces allow students from specific cultural groups to come together, it symbolically sends a message to those students that they are important. Further, those types of spaces have been found to promote a sense of belonging for students from those cultural groups (Means & Pyne, 2017; Tachine, Cabrera, & Yellow Bird, 2017).

Similarly, the participants who had Greek-letter organization-specific places to go, whether it was an organization or community office, felt those spaces contributed to their sense of belonging. Of course, using these spaces could also be a function of the participants holding leadership positions. A general member of a fraternity, for example, may not feel comfortable going to the office for Greek-letter organizations, like at WCU and SSU, if he had no connections to members of other chapters or the administrators who worked in that office. Another interesting piece to note, is that even though Jake's fraternity had part of a residence hall dedicated to his fraternity, he did not describe that space as somewhere he spent a lot of time or that it contributed to his sense of belonging, even though he was a chapter officer. One explanation could be that area of the residence hall was used exclusively as a place for members to live, and not for chapter functions like meetings or events.

Finally, Nicole, Victoria, Jake, and Molly attributed their college persistence to the sense of belonging they developed either directly or indirectly as members of their Greek-letter organizations. The connection between developing a sense of belonging through her sorority and persistence was particularly strong for Nicole. She had to wait until her second semester to join her sorority due to college policies, however, she had a hard time making friends her first semester, and almost left NSC because of that difficulty:

> So the opportunities that I tried to make friends all failed. I'm not saying that joining the sorority was a last resort thing…but it was kind of like if I don't get into this and if I don't make friends in this then I need to leave.

Unlike Nicole, Molly had made friends first semester in her classes, but struggled academically in her general education courses. Her academic struggle on top of the wear of commuting discouraged her from staying at ECU:

> I don't think if my friends joined the sorority, that I would find much value in staying at school or kind of much purpose, in that it was annoying to go back and forth by train and by car and it took a lot out. I wasn't doing well (academically) and I wasn't in…my core classes yet. So I really think because I found a sense of belonging and I found the group of friends that that's the reason that I finished school.

The participants' connection between developing a sense of belonging and their decisions to persist at their institutions is supported by both the literature on sense of belonging (Hausmann et al., 2009; Strayhorn, 2012, 2019; Strayhorn, Blakewood, & DeVita, 2008), and the literature on Greek-letter organizations (Biddix,

Singer, Aslinger, 2018; Bowman & Holmes, 2017; DeBard & Sacks, 2011; Strayhorn). Perhaps the two are connected: one reason why members of Greek-letter organizations persist at higher rates than their unaffiliated peers is *because* of the sense of belonging they develop as members of their organizations. Further, the participants' experiences support Ishitani and Reid's (2015) finding that, for commuter students, social integration is important for persistence. After all, even though Molly's reasons to leave were based on her academic and commuting experiences, it was her social connections that made her choose to stay.

Lasting Connections to the Organization and Institution

As described previously, all of the participants are still connected with at least some of the members they were friends with as undergraduates. Lys, Dustin, and Victoria, however, have had, or continue to have, formalized connections with their organizations. Lys is part of the local Rho Sigma Alumnae Association, Dustin is a former national field representative for his chapter, while Victoria is now the primary advisor for her chapter. For Victoria, her experience in Gamma Rho inspired her to continue to work with the undergraduate members:

> I think that's why I became an advisor is because I loved being part of an organization. I loved helping women improve their lives, be the best versions of themselves. I think that inspires me to do what I do now (professionally), go out and help other people be better versions of themselves. (Victoria)

Dustin was in a similar position for his fraternity, and even though Dustin is on a "little sabbatical" he continues to be a resource for his chapter brothers:

> Even now, I get calls from current members asking advice here and there…I know their tricks. No one wants to tell their national board everything, so it helps to guide them without as much of that oversight. They trust you to give them solid advice…[such as], "Do better in school. Study more. You could be doing this but you could also be studying." Stuff like that. Just being a big brother. That voice of reason…I had my time. I was an active brother. I've been there, done that. It's not me anymore…Just be a mentor. That's all you got to do at this point.

Dustin articulated his view of the advisor's role: it is not a continuation of one's undergraduate years, rather an opportunity to mentor current members. Alumni serving in advisory roles are important because they can have a strong influence on the undergraduates with whom they work. In Rosenberg's (2016) study on the leadership development of fraternity chapter presidents, he found a correlation between the advisor's communication with the chapter president and the president's leadership development. Further, he found that the presidents considered the chapter's alumni advisor, like Dustin and Victoria, to be the most important person for their development as a leader, and were more likely to go to that person for support rather than the chapter's faculty advisor or the campus Greek-letter organization advisor.

While Lys, Jake, and KW do not hold advisory positions, they are still strongly connected to their institutions. Lys talks highly about WCU to others, which is a significant change for her since she initially did not want to attend that institution. Both KW and Jake feel connected and donate back to their institutions. Jake described the various ways he now feels "invested" in SSU. Like Lys, this is a change for him

since he only went to SSU because he had no other plan for college, after he found a campus tour of the large state institution he planned on a attending to be “huge and terrifying.”

> I'm not super-involved as an alumni [sic], I still donate on the donation days and all that kind of stuff. So I do feel time-invested, financially-invested, and just care about the university. So when things happen at school, it almost feels personal [laughter]. So I do care about the university a lot, more than I ever would have cared about my high school.

Research on the financial contributions of Greek-letter organization alumni to their institutions yield mixed results (Gaier, 2005; Wapner, 2017). Indeed, only two of the participants indicated they donated financially, and only Jake donated directly to the institution. KW’s donations, in contrast, were to a philanthropy event held by a WCU fraternity. However, as indicated by the participants, donations are not the only way that alumni can remain involved in their alma mater. Gaier (2005) found that while alumni of Greek-letter organizations were no more likely to donate than non-members, they were more likely to actively participate as alumni. While it is unclear what “participation” entailed in his study, Victoria and Dustin, regularly participated in the life of NSC by returning to work with their undergraduate chapters. Similarly, Weerts, Cabrera, and Sanford (2010) argued that alumni can also participate by advocating for their institutions, which is the way Lys contributes as an alumna.

Theme Summary

Belonging for the participants occurred at different levels. In addition to feeling like they belonged in their chapters, they also felt like they belonged in the

Greek-letter organization and the college or university communities. Feeling a sense of belonging in the Greek-letter organization community was separate from the belonging they felt in their chapters, but was similar to part of the process of developing a sense of belonging at the chapter-level in that it depended on making connections with members of other organizations. In contrast, belonging to their college or university acted more as an extension to their chapter-level belonging because the new experiences they were having as members of a Greek-letter organizations was inseparable from the experience they had as a student in general: the first part of this chapter described how the participants spent most of their time alone, but, as described in this section, they wanted to be on campus and had places to go once there after they joined their organizations. For some, the connection to their chapters and institutions has lasted into their alumni years. Victoria, Lys, and Dustin, for example, either have or had formal connections to their chapters, while others, like Jake and KW financially contribute back to their institutions in some manner. The participants' experiences clearly indicated that joining a Greek-letter organization can have much wider and longer-lasting implications than the immediate experiences they have in their chapters.

Chapter Summary

Four themes related to the experience of commuter students in Greek-letter organizations at primarily commuter public institutions emerged from this study (see Table 4.1 for a summary). The first, *seeking to belong*, described how, for the most part, participants spent time alone when they came to their campuses. Like many commuter students, their free time between classes was spent in their cars and they

had minimal interactions with students outside of class. With the exception of Nicole, none of the participants were looking to join a Greek-letter organization. Further, the participants did not know much about these organizations, and what they knew primarily was based on the media and common stereotypes. They joined however, because they wanted to change the experiences they were having at college, but still had to manage the challenges that came along with being a commuter student and find ways to overcome those obstacles.

For some of the participants, knowing peers in either their organization or another Greek-letter organization was helpful in initially connecting them with their chapters. Knowing these members was part of the second theme, *personal connections*. In addition to having those connections prior to joining, it was important for participants to find a group of friends in their chapter once they became members. The participants found it challenging, however, when their group of friends were parts of other groups of friends, or when the "cliques" in the organization were at odds with one another. Now as alumni, they are still friends other chapter members.

The third theme, *feeling welcomed and accepted,* consisted of feeling accepted for their authentic selves in their chapter. One of the aspects of this theme was the policies and practices implemented by the chapters and national organizations. While some were friendly to the commuter student experience, others were not. Participants were particularly challenged at the chapter-level when meetings and events went late into the night. While the participants were not directly impacted by their national organization policies and practices, the extent to which the national organization staff understood the commuter student experience was questionable.

In addition to developing a sense of belonging in their chapters, the participants developed belonging elsewhere as a result of their membership. This experience is captured in the last theme, *belonging beyond the chapter*. As members, and especially as leaders, of Greek-letter organizations, the participants had the opportunity to connect with members of other organizations, which helped them develop a sense of belonging in that community. They also felt a sense of belonging to their institutions by extension of their membership. Being a member of a Greek-letter organization influenced their college experience in general because it made them want to go to campus and gave them places to go when they got there, whereas prior to joining they were either reluctant to go to campus or did not enjoy doing so, and when they did, often spent time alone. Four of the participants attributed their persistence at their institutions to the sense of belonging they developed on campus as a result of their membership. Some of the participants are still connected to their organizations and institutions as alumni, which points to the lasting impact of membership in a Greek-letter organization.

The four themes will be revisited in the next chapter. In this last chapter I will summarize the study, discuss how these themes provide an answer to the research questions, and provide recommendations for practice and future research. These findings and recommendations will add to the small, but important, body of literature that examines commuter students as a specific sub-population of Greek-letter organization members.

Table 4.1

Summary of Themes

Theme	Description
Seeking to Belong	Participants sought out membership in Greek-letter organizations in order to help them make friends and increas their sense of belonging at their institutions, even though mo had limited knowledge of these organizations or did not inte to join them when they started college. Like many other commuter students, however, they still faced obstacles (working, traveling, time management), and had to develop strategies to overcome them. Due to their obligations, the participants expressed a high level of consciousness about their time and money in relation to their experience.
Personal Connections	The personal connections participants had with other students were influential in their decision to join a Greek-letter organization. Once members, developing connections with a smaller group of other members was important to help them feel like they belonged in their chapter. Conflict between those groups, however, detracted from that belonging.
Welcoming and Accepting Members	The ability to feel welcomed and accepted for participants' authentic selves was important for their sense of belonging. Authenticity included the extent to which they were supported as commuter students, including their need to work and the time they spent traveling to and from campus. Beyond the member-to-member relationships, their experiences as commuter students was supported to varying degrees by chapter and national organization policies and practices.
Belonging Beyond the Chapter	In addition to feeling like they belonged in their chapters, the participants also felt a sense of belonging in the larger Greek-letter organization community and at their college or university. Further, all of the participants maintain friendships with other chapter members from their undergraduate years, and some either had or have held formal positions with their organizations as alumni, think highly of their undergraduate institutions because of their membership, or donate back to their institution or specific causes.

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CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to explore the experience of commuter students in Greek-letter organizations at primarily commuter public institutions. Four themes emerged from interviews with nine participants using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Those themes were (1) seeking to belong, (2) personal connections, (3) welcoming and accepting members, and (4) belonging beyond the chapter. This chapter will connect those themes to the four research questions that guided this study, describe the importance of this study, and provide recommendations for research, policy, and practice.

Discussion

This study had four research questions. The primary question was *how do alumni who were commuter students and members of Greek-letter organizations at primarily commuter public institutions describe their member experience?* The three secondary research questions were: *What comprised the experience of belonging for these alumni? What, if anything, lead to or detracted from their sense of belonging?* And, *how, if at all, did their membership contribute to their sense of belonging on campus?* This section will summarize the findings to the research questions based on the themes identified in chapter 4, and place them in context of the larger bodies of literature on Greek-letter organizations, college student sense of belonging, and commuter students.

Research Question One

The primary research question explored the participants' experiences in Greek-letter organizations. In general, the participants were not looking to join a Greek-letter organization, specifically. Instead, they were looking for something at their institutions to which they could belong. This finding was not surprising considering Maslow (1970) argued that belonging is a need individuals seek to fulfill, especially when they enter a new environment, which Strayhorn (2012, 2019) applied to higher education settings. Fulfilling this need either led them to join their Greek-letter organization directly, or participate in another involvement opportunity, which then connected them with their organization. As much of the higher education research has indicated, the influence of the participants' peers was evident (Mayhew et al., 2016; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). For many of the participants, either knowing someone who was affiliated with their Greek-letter organization, affiliated with another Greek-letter organization, or a peer who encouraged them to attend recruitment events together facilitated their decision to join.

Prior to joining, the participants knew little about Greek-letter organizations except from what they saw in the media. Some also had peers who joined Greek-letter organizations at larger residential institutions, and learned about the experience from them, or at least had a perception of the experience they were having. As Heida (1986) argued, the participants' reference point for these organizations was based on the experience students had at primarily residential institutions, particularly those that housed their Greek-letter organizations. Even though they did not know much about the experience prior, joining a Greek-letter organization was transformative for their

college experience. When not in class, the participants typically spent most of their time in their cars or in common spaces alone before joining, which is consistent with Weiss' (2014) findings. After they joined however, they wanted to spend more time on campus, felt that they had a reason to go, and knew they could find places where they would know others once there.

Still, the participants had many of the common challenges associated with being a commuter student. One challenge for commuter students in Greek-letter organizations that Heida (1986) articulated was the limited amount of time they had to spend on campus. While time was certainly a challenge for the participants, it was a function of other challenges associated with the commuter experience, mainly the need to work (Burlison, 2015; Wilmes & Quade, 1986) and traveling to campus (Clay, 2016; Gefen & Fish, 2013; Kirk & Lewis, 2015). In order to balance the time and requirements necessary to be a member, they had to develop a variety of strategies to overcome the obstacles they faced. Two strategies included rearranging their class and work schedules and getting on-campus jobs.

Perhaps one factor of the time-related argument for commuter students that has been overlooked is a perceived value of the time spent on campus compared with the time they could be spending elsewhere. For example, a commuter student who has few connections to their institution may not place a priority in rearranging their schedules to be on campus for prolonged periods, whereas a commuter student with friends and places where they feel like they belong may make those changes, as the participants in this study did. Indeed, once the participants became involved, which for most was primarily their Greek-letter organization, their time could now be spent with others in

places on campus where they knew they could be with other members as opposed to waiting in their cars or in common spaces alone. As Weiss (2014) suggested, that this free time between classes could be time commuter students spend engaging with others on campus, which is how the participants in this study used their time once they became members.

In addition to their obstacles, their experience as commuters was both facilitated and made more challenging by their chapter policies and practices. The participants found it helpful when their chapters were flexible in terms of financial obligations and event times. Even so, most participants found it challenging to attend chapter meetings and events that did not work with their schedules, especially if they went late at night during the week. Interestingly, however, none of the participants were able to change the timing of their chapter functions so that they occurred during the day, even for those who attended the three institutions with set times during the week that classes did not occur in order for students to engage in activities. The inability to shift the chapter's operations away from evening and weekend activities also seems to reflect a resident-centric higher education experience, even when the majority of the students commute (Attewell & Lavin, 2012; Jacoby, 2015), in the chapter or otherwise.

Even if the chapter's general operations did not change to accommodate their schedules, the participants still were able to develop strong relationships with their peers. Relationships with peers are important because they increase sense of belonging and, in turn, persistence (Bean, 1985; Hausmann, Ye, Schofield, & Woods, 2009; Strayhorn, Blakewood, & DeVita, 2008). Just as membership in Greek-letter

organizations has been connected with persistence elsewhere in the literature (Biddix, Singer, & Aslinger, 2018; Biddix, Singer, Bureau, Nicholson, & Ishitani, 2019; Bowman & Holmes, 2017; DeBard & Sacks, 2011; Routon & Walker, 2014), some of the participants in this study either directly or indirectly identified their Greek-letter organization as a reason for remaining at their institutions. While deferring students' ability to join a Greek-letter organization until their second semester or beyond is a contested topic (DeBard & Sacks; McCreary, Bray, & Thoma, 2016; National Panhellenic Conference, 2020; Wechsler, Kuh, & Davenport, 1996), it seems that allowing commuter students to join in their first semester is beneficial because it assists with developing social connections early in their college careers, which can positively influence persistence. Nicole, for example, was one of the participants who were required to wait until beyond her first semester to join a sorority and almost left NSC as a result.

In additional to chapter policies, national organization policies had an impact, although less directly, on the participants. For example, while the amount Hope's chapter spent to host their leadership consultant did not directly affect her, it indirectly syphoned her chapter dues money away from other chapter activities. Even though they were not directly affected, none of the participants felt that their national organizations had a strong understanding of the commuter student experience. Further, they felt that the policies and practices implemented by their national organizations did not take chapter characteristics, such as the proportion of commuter students, into account. The presence of such policies is an example that supports Heida's (1986)

assertion that the Greek-letter organization experience focuses on residential students and institutions.

Interestingly, while the participants were able to critique and comment on the way their chapters and national organizations' policies affected their experience, only Molly and Jake were able to offer substantial commentary on the way college-level policies influenced the experience of commuter students in Greek-letter organizations. It is not surprising that these two able to do so, since not only are they Greek-letter organization advisors themselves, they have both worked at multiple institutions, and therefore, have multiple reference points from which to draw. The lack of critique from the other participants should not be interpreted as having an experience that is wholly supported by their institution from a policy and practice standpoint. Rather, as constructionism suggests, the other participants were simply making meaning of the world based on their own contexts (Crotty, 1998), which may or may not be able to be improved from the findings and recommendations in this study.

Beyond the undergraduate experience, all the participants are still friends with other members from their chapters as alumni. Certainly, the participants were not still friends with all the members from their undergraduate days, and they all were no more than a few years out of college, but perhaps the connections made from the experience these participants had are longer lasting than DeSantis' (2007) findings indicated. Beyond sustained friendships, however, Lys, Dustin, and Victoria either are currently, or have previously been, connected with their chapters and organizations in a formal capacity. Further, KW, Jake, and Lys had experiences that made a lasting connection between them and their institutions in a way that inspires them to speak highly about

their universities, participate as donors, or both. Regardless of how or to what extent the participants are connected, their experiences speak to the lasting experience membership in a Greek-letter organization can have on their members.

More broadly, the findings from this research question also align with, and differ from, some of the findings about commuter student involvement. As Alfano and Eduljee (2013) and Clay (2016) found, the participants were interested in getting involved, even though they commuted to campus, and as Krause (2007) found, their involvement helped them meet other people. One of Clay's findings was that commuter students who were involved in college also were involved in high school. The participants in this study, however, largely did not indicate being involved in their high schools. In fact, Dustin and Hope commented on their lack of involvement in high school as a motivator to join their organizations. Further, with the exception of Lys, the participants did not indicate they waited to join a Greek-letter organization in order to manage their other responsibilities first, which was another of Clay's major findings. These differences may have to do with the culture of the institution from which Clay's participants were selected or the breadth of activities in which his participants were involved. Finally, one of the most notable differences is the participants placed a much stronger emphasis on peers for developing a sense of belonging than the participants in Manley Lima's (2014) study. This difference, however, is likely due to the intentional participant selection in this study, compared with the secondary data analysis from a national survey as Manley Lima used.

Research Question Two

The second question explored how the participants described their experience of belonging. One finding related to this question was that the participants first felt like they could belong to their Greek-letter organizations while they were being recruited because of the people they met, the interactions they had, and, for some, the identities of the current members. Belonging, however, then also had to be developed once they were members, and hinged on creating personal connections with a group of friends within the chapter and feeling welcomed and accepted for their authentic selves by the entire organization.

The participants' descriptions of they ways they experienced belonging aligned with the ways that others have conceptualized belonging. Baumeister and Leary (1995), for example, described belonging as dependent on "interpersonal relationships…with a few other people" (p. 497), which was clearly described by the participants as having a group of friends within their chapters. Belonging, however, was not solely dependent upon those relationships. It was also dependent upon feeling like they were accepted for who they were (Cohen, McCreary, & Schutts, 2017; Goodenow, 1993; McCreary & Schutts, 2015; Vaccaro & Newman, 2016), in what Strayhorn (2012) described as a "defined group" (p. 87), which in this case, was their Greek-letter organization.

Some of the participants (Jake, KW, Lys, and Molly) also indicated that having others who shared identities and experiences was helpful in making them feel like they could belong during the recruitment process and then as a member. Quite a bit of literature has connected belonging with the ability for students to interact with others

who share minoritized social identities (Means & Pyne, 2017; Orta, Murguia, & Cruz, 2019; Stapleton & Nicolazzo, 2019; Strayhorn, 2012, 2019; Tachine, Cabrera, & Yellow Bird, 2017; Vaccaro, Daly-Cano, & Newman, 2015; Vaccaro & Newman, 2016, 2017). Indeed, that was the case for Jake, KW, and Lys. While Jake's sense of belonging was specific to his sexual identity, it was broader for KW and Lys in terms of their racial and ethnic identities. For them, their belonging was positively influenced by joining a chapter with other women of color generally, rather than Black and Hispanic women specifically. Knowing there were commuter students was also helpful for KW and Molly in terms of their belonging because it helped them feel more confident that they could participate in their sororities, and aligned with the notion that as members of a minoritized group, commuter students also need to find other commuters with whom to connect (Gefen & Fish, 2013; Pokorny, Holley, & Kane, 2017).

Again, KW and Lys' description of their chapter having members that were more diverse than "stereotypical…blonde hair, blue eye[d]" (KW) sorority women, helped them both feel like they could belong in the chapter. Even though having other women of color suggests there were others "like them" in their chapter, it also points to how diversity within a group can lead to sense of belonging (Hausmann et al., 2009, Johnson et al., 2007; Li, 2018; Maestas, Vaquera, & Zehr, 2007; Strayhorn, 2008). While others discussed diversity in their chapters, it was primarily in terms of interests, personalities, and home regions, and generally not connected to their sense of belonging.

Finally, all the participants described belonging as a fluctuating experience; one in which they felt like they belonged more strongly at times, less strongly at others, and for some, had experiences which made them question whether or not they belonged in their organizations at all. This is not surprising since a shifting sense of belonging over time has been well documented in the literature (Bowman, Jarratt, Jang, & Bono, 2019; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Hausmann et al., 2009; Means & Pyne, 2017; Vaccaro & Newman, 2017). With the exception of Hurtado and Carter, however, the changes in belonging examined in these studies were only over the course of the participants' first year, and in one (Bowman et al.), only the first semester. Further, since most of the studies examined sense on belonging solely at the college level, only two (Means & Pyne; Vaccaro & Newman) had findings that suggested sense of belonging changed within student organizations over time, like the participants in this study described.

Research Question Three

Research question three explored the contributors and detractors of the participants' sense of belonging. While having a group of friends contributed to belonging, it was also influenced by whether not their friends were part of other groups in the chapter and how the various groups, or "cliques," in the chapter interacted. In general, as long as the groups of friends within the chapter were getting along, then the participants did not feel a diminished sense of belonging. If there was conflict between the groups, or a participant felt excluded because their group of friends belonged to multiple groups, then their sense of belonging was diminished.

As described in the previous section, while the first part of belonging centered on a subset of members, the second part – feeling welcomed and accepted as a member – was dependent on the group as a whole. One aspect included a diminished sense of belonging when they found out other members talked negatively about them. This manifested in a variety of ways including feeling singled out, being treated unfairly, getting ignored, or, in Jake's case, being the target of a homophobic remark. A second aspect, feeling like they were accepted for their authentic selves, including their status as commuters, positively influenced the participants' sense of belonging. While commuter students' minoritization within higher education is based primarily on institutional structures, and is socially, politically, and historically different from members of other minoritized groups, participants still felt a diminished sense of belonging when their interactions with members invalidated their experiences, including their experience as commuter students.

A finding that belonging was dependent upon the relationships participants had with other members in their chapters is not surprising. Not only are peer relationships one of the strongest influences on college students in general (Mayhew et al., 2016; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005), they have also been associated with developing a sense of belonging (Bowman et al., 2019; Johnson et al., 2007; Hausmann et al., 2009; Means & Pyne, 2017; Pokorny et al., 2017; Strayhorn, 2012, 2019; Strayhorn et al., 2008; Vaccaro & Newman, 2016, 2017). Jabs (2018), whose work, in part, explored the experience of belonging for sorority women, also found that smaller groups within the chapters and the interactions members had with others influenced their sense of belonging. Her participants described their negative experiences as "bullying" (p. 76).

Even though the participants in this study did not use that term, the sentiment is the same – perceiving or actually being targeted or negatively talked about by other chapter members.

Fostering and engaging positive relationships with other members did not mean that participants acted in specific ways solely to have other people like them. It was still important that they demonstrated authenticity in ways that allowed them to be their "true" (Dustin) selves, which has been described elsewhere as important to sense of belonging (Cohen et al., 2017; Goodenow, 1993; McCreary & Schutts, 2015; Vaccaro & Newman, 2016). The participants also seemed to indicate that authenticity was a more powerful influencer on their sense of belonging than having fun. This is an interesting finding for two reasons. First, Vaccaro and Newman found that having "fun" (p. 936) contributed to sense of belonging for students with privileged social identities, like many of the participants in this study. Second, is that Greek-letter organizations are primarily social in nature and, therefore, one might assume a placing a priority on fun is important. This finding may be the result of the participants reflecting on their entire undergraduate experience as opposed to just their first year. It could also be that all of the participants held leadership positions, which require a greater level of responsibility than general members, who might associate fun and belonging more strongly. The finding could also be related to the participants' drive to join a Greek-letter organization as fueled by a need to belong rather than wanting to break into a social environment to which Greek-letter organization members may only have access (DeSantis, 2007).

Taken in concert with the results from the first two research questions, the participants described what some scholars have identified as the behavioral and psychological elements of belonging (Hausmann et al., 2009; Hurtado & Carter, 1997). In other words, joining a Greek-letter organization was a behavioral drive in order to fulfill their need to belong (i.e., Maslow, 1970). That action to fulfill their need, however, was separate from the feeling of belonging itself. In order for that feeling to occur they needed to develop personal relationships with a small group of people, but also needed to feel welcomed and accepted for their authentic selves – including being commuter students – to develop a sense of belonging in their chapters.

Research Question Four

The last research question examined how the participants' membership in their Greek-letter organizations contributed to their sense of belonging at their institutions. As described above, the participants felt like they wanted to be on campus more after they joined their organizations because they felt like they had places to go and people to be with when they got there. Some participants attended institutions with designated spaces for Greek-letter organization members, but common areas on campus also took on new meaning for the participants once they joined their organization. For example, the dining hall or student union lounge were no longer places where the participants would go and be alone; they would go and be with their fellow chapter members.

Heida (1986) identified one of the challenges of Greek-letter organizations on commuter campuses as not having a chapter house as a space for informal interactions. The institutions, members themselves, or both, however, made accommodations for not having houses. Institutions addressed this challenge by provided spaces for

members of Greek-letter organizations, and the members transformed the meaning ascribed to the spaces that were already there, which is part of an interactive process between students and their environment (Strange & Banning, 2001, 2015). Just as the literature on sense of belonging for other minoritized student populations was influenced by specific spaces on campus (Means & Pyne, 2017; Tachine et al., 2017), as commuter students, the participants' belonging was influenced by campus spaces that were either provided or ascribed socially constructed meanings related to their organizations.

In the context of student organizations, the majority of the literature that connects involvement and sense of belonging focuses on belonging at the institution as a whole (e.g., Bowman et al., 2019; Johnson et al., 2007; Manley Lima, 2014). While that was also the case here, this study also examined how belonging was experienced at the organization- and institutional-levels separately, which others have found to occur (Means & Pyne, 2017; Strayhorn, 2012, 2019; Vaccaro & Newman, 2017).

Even though the participants' membership contributed to their belonging at their institution, the fluctuation of their sense of belonging in their organization did not seem to affect their belonging at the institution as a whole. This finding is somewhat related to Hausmann, Schofield, and Woods' (2007) finding that institutional commitment and intention to persist for first-year students remains after they develop an initial sense of belonging at their institution, even if that feeling of belonging diminishes over time. Perhaps the sense of belonging participants developed in their organizations increased their feeling of belonging at the college-level enough so that even when they felt like did not belong in their organizations, they still felt like they

belonged at their institutions. Of course, the selection criteria for this study would have eliminated anyone who left their institution after a decreased or unachieved sense belonging in their chapter.

In addition to contributing to their sense of belonging at their institutions, joining a Greek-letter organization also gave the participants an opportunity to develop a sense of belonging with the larger community of Greek-letter organizations. Unlike the feeling of belonging at the institution-level, which was derived from their chapter membership, feeling like they belonged within the Greek-letter organization community also depended on making friends with members of other chapters. This occurred to varying degrees with the participants, and might be a result of the opportunities they had as chapter leaders to meet members from other organizations, like Hope described.

This finding draws a distinction between ascribed membership in the larger community by way of chapter membership, and actually feeling like they belonged in the Greek-letter organization community. While research involving only historically White Greek-letter organizations considers them to be one in the same (Matthews, Featherstone, Bluder, Gerling, Loge, & Messenger, 2009), research on or including culturally-based Greek-letter organizations draws a distinction between the two, and points to the racial segregation within Greek-letter organization communities (Garcia, 2019; Ray, 2013). Indeed, Kevin, as a member of a multicultural organization, seemed to feel the least connected to the community out of all the participants, even though he is White. While an analysis of this phenomenon through a critical race lens is worth more study, it is beyond the scope of this dissertation. One important connection to

make, however, is that it is apparent one's Greek-letter organization and the larger Greek-letter organization community are, as in Strayhorn's (2012) definition, different "defined groups" (p. 87) to which a student can feel and develop a sense of belonging.

Importance of the Study

The primary importance of this study is its focus on exploring the experience of commuter students as members of Greek-letter organizations at primarily commuter public institutions. Few other studies on Greek-letter organization membership have explicitly included commuter students at any type of institution, and all of those have been quantitative studies that examined specific outcomes associated with membership. While diving into the experience itself illuminates some related outcomes, it also reveals the benefits and challenges associated with being a commuter student in a Greek-letter organization at this institutional type. In terms of sense of belonging, this study provides more support to the idea that belonging occurs in various contexts at an institution, and that belonging in one space is separate from the feeling of belonging to the institution as a whole. Findings from the study also describe the elements that comprise the experience of belonging within a specific group, in this instance, Greek-letter organizations. Finally, the study opens up new areas of inquiry, which will be discussed in the next section.

Implications for Research

While this study adds to the literature, it also points to a number of areas that still need to be explored. The participants in this study all held formal leadership positions and were mostly from historically White organizations. Further research should explore the membership experience for commuter students who did not hold

leadership positions in college, as well as explore the experience of commuter students who were part of other culturally-based Greek-letter organizations, such as historically Black, Latinx, Asian, and Native American organizations. Additionally, the size of the Greek-letter organization communities of which the members were a part, varied greatly. Further research should explore how the size of the communities, and the associated policies within those communities, influence the experience of membership for commuter students. Additional research could also explore how involvement in Greek-letter organizations differs from other types of involvement for commuter students (e.g., non-Greek-letter organizations, campus employment) in terms of sense of belonging. Finally, while this study examined the experience of commuter students at primarily commuter institutions, further research could explore the experience of commuter students at primarily residential institutions, especially those that house their Greek-letter organizations.

Recommendations for Policy and Practice

Findings from this study lead to recommendations for chapters and alumni advisors, college and university administrators, and national organizations (see Table 5.1 for a summary). The recommendations presented below emphasize structural changes that could shift policies and practices to become more supportive of commuter students. While focused on commuter students, however, implementing these policies and practices could be beneficial for residential members as well.

Chapters and Alumni Advisors

Chapters can help support their commuter student members by being mindful of their meeting and event times, length, and days which they are held, as well as planning

chapter functions far enough in advance for members to take time off of work. Since commuter students have to work and travel to and from campus, it may be helpful to develop a list of minimum expectations a member must meet in order to remain active, and regularly share those expectations with potential and current members. Sullivan (2012) recommended these types of lists be developed based around the general member's expectations, not the chapter leadership's expectations, as they may have skewed assumptions about what constitutes enough participation to remain active.

In addition to scheduling, chapters can implement payment plans to help those members who work to pay for their dues manage their finances. While many chapters do this already in the form of monthly payments throughout the semester, it may be helpful to expand the payments plans to in include a 12-month option. Not only will this make the monthly payments more manageable, but also if members are paying throughout the summer it will ensure the chapter has enough funds available to them for activities that occur at the start of the fall semester. Breaking down the cost of membership and describing it in terms of cost per week could be helpful for the value-conscious commuter students who need to work. For example, if dues are $400.00 per semester, telling a student that membership is going to cost $800.00 per year is likely daunting. However, that cost breaks down to less than $15.50 a week, which, depending on the state's minimum wage, is less than two hours of work per week.

In order to help members create and maintain a sense of belonging, chapters can develop structured and unstructured opportunities for members to connect and develop friendships with one another in order to proliferate and strengthen the individual connections that constitute belonging. To promote sense of belonging

Table 5.1

Recommendations for Policy and Practice

Group	Recommendations
Chapters & Alumni Advisors	• Plan meetings and events ahead • Be mindful of meeting and event lengths, dates, and times • Develop minimum membership expectation • Implement 12-month payment plans and market the cost of membership dues in terms of weekly amounts • Create multiple opportunities for members to connect with one another • Assist individuals and groups resolve conflicts within the chapter • Recruit and admit diverse members, and provide programming to support their experience • Encourage campus involvement beyond the chapter, including holding on-campus jobs
College & University Administrators	• Be thoughtful about recognition requirements, using the information chapters send to their headquarters as a substitute for campus requirements when possible • Plan meetings and events ahead • Be mindful of meeting and event lengths, dates, and times • Implement time throughout the week where no classes are held • Create spaces for Greek-letter organizations • Allow for first-semester and on-going recruitment • Designate office and alumni funds to support individual members, chapters, and Greek-letter organization community • Advocate for the experience of Greek-letter organization membership at primarily commuter institutions
National Organizations	• Audit policies and practices • Develop equitable awards structures • Run focus groups to understand the experience of commuter students in your organization • Include commuter students on staff and national board • Provide scholarships for regional and national conferences for commuter students • Consider the number of hours members need to work in determining membership requirements • Include ride share programs under insurance policies

further, chapters, in conjunction with their alumni advisors, can develop a process for mitigating and helping resolve conflicts between individuals and groups in the chapter in an unbiased and non-punitive fashion. Further, chapters should actively recruit and admit a diverse pool of members, and work with their home institutions to implement workshops and training on recognizing their own biases and promoting social justice. This type of education could be implemented as early as new member education, but would need to be on going throughout a member's collegiate career.

Finally, chapters can encourage members to become involved on campus. As most of the participants indicated, knowing a member or someone who is affiliated with a Greek-letter organization was one the ways members became initially connected. For commuter students, involvement could mean getting a job on campus (Manley Lima, 2014; Weiss, 2014), which would help them be on campus more often, reduce the number of hours they are working off-campus, and connect them with students outside of their chapters. Chapters could further promote involvement by having it count toward, or replace other, membership requirements. While this may seem counterintuitive, taking the time on the front end to recruit more members would help distribute the amount of work necessary for chapter operations such as preparing for events, and fulfilling attendance requirements set by their host institutions and national organizations.

College and University Administrators

Just as chapters need to be mindful of the timing and length of events, so too should college and university administrators. Implementing times throughout the week where no classes occur for students to engage in co-curricular activities can be helpful

for commuter students, and has been found to increase student engagement (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2005). Indeed, those participants who had this time available to them found it to be a convenient way to engage with campus. Primarily commuter institutions might consider setting aside multiple time blocks during the week to help accommodate commuter students' varying schedules. Programming for the Greek-letter organization community during these blocks could help commuter students participate in community programming at a time that is convenient for them.

In addition to creating time for commuter students to engage in Greek-letter organization-related activities, colleges and universities need to create space for them as well. While having space with the appropriate amenities is important for all commuter students (Braxton, Doyle, Hartley, Hirschy, Jones, & McLendon, 2014; Pokorny et al., 2017; Weiss, 2014), having space for Greek-letter organization members to gather formally and informally is important too. These spaces would allow members to interact with members from other chapters, and if placed proximally to the campus Greek-letter organization advisor's office, allow for regular contact between college staff and students. Specific offices for the chapters would be particularly helpful for the organizations. Victoria described her chapter's office at NSC to be a space where members went in between class to hang out or do homework. These spaces, however, could also be used to hold small meetings, store paperwork, and keep ritual equipment secure.

College and university administrators should also be mindful of the requirements they set for chapters to maintain recognition. For example, institutions commonly implement annual accreditation or standards programs for chapters to

complete. While these programs can be helpful to tangibly demonstrate chapters' contributions to their members and institutions (Bureau & Barber, 2020), they can be time consuming depending on the amount of work they require (Sasso, 2012), and often are in addition to the types of reports chapters have to submit for their headquarters anyway. Campus advisors could support chapters at primarily commuter institutions by collecting and reviewing what information chapters are submitting to their national organizations already and being thoughtful about what other metrics, if any, are necessary to demonstrate the importance of Greek-letter organizations to their constituents. Certainly, some information will be necessary to submit on an annual or semiannual basis, but reducing the amount of time spent on requirements for the institution can help commuter students dedicate more time to chapter operations, academics, and their additional responsibilities.

Recruitment policies are also important to consider when working with Greek-letter organizations at primarily commuter institutions. While some have advocated for deferring recruitment as a way to curb unwanted behavior like hazing (McCreary et al., 2016) and excessive drinking (Wechsler et al., 1996), allowing commuter students to join in their first semester is a way to improve the connections with their institutions, their peers, and increase persistence. Further, colleges and universities should allow (and encourage) their chapters to do on-going recruitment throughout the semester as opposed to limiting them to a defined recruitment period. Since commuter students may have difficulty taking the necessary time off work, or may be hesitant to rearrange their schedules for an organization they might be able to participate in long-term, limiting the recruitment period to a specific set of days creates an additional

barrier which they must overcome. Allowing a flexible recruitment schedule permits members to develop the individual connections with commuter students they meet in on-campus jobs, other campus activities, and in class, which are important to the recruitment process.

Needing to work does not just have implications regarding time; it has financial implications as well. Since membership in Greek-letter organizations can be beneficial both to the students who participate and the institutions that host them, administrators, particularly at primarily commuter institutions, can help their students by financially supporting their Greek-letter organization community. Some examples of financial support include providing funds for individual chapter or community programming, creating scholarships to help students attend regional and national conferences mandated by their national headquarters, and partnering with the institution's alumni association and foundation to identify donors and set up an endowment to help students pay their membership dues if they find themselves with unexpected financial emergencies. Institutions should also ensure that their Greek-letter organizations have equal access to the funds available to all student organizations. These types of financial supports help chapters operate with a lower budget, which results in lower membership dues for each student, and therefore, can facilitate involvement in these organizations.

Finally, college and university administrators need to advocate for their communities. Firstly, they need to work with students to develop promotional campaigns that accurately depict the experience of Greek-letter organizations at primarily commuter institutions. While participants described the difference between

the experiences they had compared to larger residential institutions, some still held stereotypes about what it meant to be a member of a Greek-letter organization prior to joining. Perhaps sharing a more accurate picture that differs from the *Animal House* experience, as Jake described, could help recruit more students who may not realize that membership could be for them. Secondly, colleges and universities need to advocate on behalf of their commuter students and work with national organizations to develop policies and practices that work for their students.

National Organizations

National organizations can also assist their chapters at primarily commuter institutions. To begin, national organizations can audit their policies and practices for equity. For example, housed chapters can more easily absorb the costs associated with national headquarters staff visits, especially if the house has a chef and a guest bedroom. As Hope described, the costs associated with hosting their leadership consultant put a financial strain on her chapter because they had to house and feed the staff member during her visits to the chapter. Distributing the total cost of leadership consultant visits between all chapters and assessing it as part of the chapters' annual fees to the national headquarters would help those chapters at primarily commuter institutions, as well as other chapters without housing.

Further, national organizations might want to consider their awards structures so that chapters "compete" with other similar chapters. Simply not having a chapter house can create inequity. Since chapters with houses do not have to work around other campus events for space and may have fewer restrictions, it is easier for them to host programs (Ray, 2013), which are considered for some awards. Awards structures

may seem trivial, but winning them can motivate chapter leaders and influence the perception of which chapters are the "best," which can compound inequities if national organizations only recruit staff and seek undergraduate and alumni representation on national boards, committees, and task forces from those chapters.

In order to help bring commuter students voices forward, national organizations can organize virtual or in-person focus groups for their commuter student members to learn more about their experiences, needs, and to what extent current policies and practices work for them and their chapters. They can also intentionally hire members who commuted as undergraduates to work on staff. Having staff members who lived this experience would be helpful when visiting or starting chapters at primarily commuter institutions. A step further would be to have a seat on the national governing board to represent commuter students. At a minimum, however, national organizations need to train their staff, particularly the ones doing chapter visits, about the needs of commuter students and the experiences of members at primarily commuter institutions.

Another way national organizations can assist their commuter members is to provide scholarship opportunities to attend regional and national conferences. Attendance at these conferences is often mandatory and the costs can add up quickly, especially if flights and hotel stays are involved. Providing scholarships could assist students and chapters with limited resources to attend, and help undergraduate members familiarize themselves with the national organization and its operations necessary to fulfill the types of leadership positions that would highlight the commuter student experience.

Two specific policies could also help commuter students at the chapter-level. The first is to develop a special membership status that takes members' need to work into account. By allowing the members to participate to the extent they are able while still considered an active member would help them keep them stay connected to the other members and institution. Second, include ride share programs (i.e., Uber, Lyft) under the chapters' insurance policies, and therefore as an acceptable transportation method to and from chapter events. National organizations certainly have a responsibility to keep their members safe, and shield themselves, their chapters, and their members from legal liability. Therefore, while making chapters use hired transportation from a single location on-campus like a chapter house may make sense for residential institutions, it is likely riskier to have members drive to and from campus in order to use the transportation for an event that might be closer to their residence anyway.

Concluding Thoughts

Our general cultural assumption about Greek-letter organization members is that they are all White, rich, entitled students who live in mansions, who use their power and prestige to evade any behavior consequences from their institution's administration, and whose goal is having fun until graduation, at which point they will walk into a job their parents or an alumnus has set up for them. That picture is incomplete. Certainly, these chapters and members exist, but the Greek-letter organization world makes up significantly more diverse experiences than what is nested in our collective consciousness.

Commuter student members in chapters at primarily commuter public institutions are one such example. The participants in this study worked hard, and they had to work harder because the structures that were not necessarily designed with them in mind. Membership in a Greek-letter organization, when done right, can be an incredibly powerful experience. That power was evident with the participants. It helped them make friends, feel like they belonged at their institutions, and, for some, was a reason why they stayed at their college or university. Even now, they remain friends, and continue to be supported by, their fellow chapter members. This experience, however, should not be reserved for those who have the ability to live on campus. My hope is that this work shines some light on the experience of commuter students at primarily commuter institutions, and it encourages chapters, colleges and universities, and national organizations to consider shaping their policies and practices to help commuter students not just access, but thrive, in our organizations.

APPENDICIES

Appendix A: E-Mail Communication with Campus Advisors

Initial E-Mail

Dear [NAME],

My name is Michael Giacalone. I am the Interim Assistant Director of Student Activities at Rhode Island College and a doctoral student in the University of Rhode Island/Rhode Island College joint Ph.D. in Education program. I am currently recruiting participants for my dissertation research on the experience of commuter students in fraternities and sororities, and I am reaching out to you in hopes that you would be willing to connect me with some of your fraternity and sorority community alumni.

I am looking for participants who meet the following criteria:

- Alumni who participated in a social fraternity or sorority as an undergraduate
- Graduated within the last 5 years (May 2014 or later)
- Commuted/lived off-campus throughout their undergraduate career
- Attended your institution for at least two years

Additionally, participants must be from campuses that do not have fraternity/sorority housing owned or operated by the institution, national organization, national housing corporation, or a local alumni association. However, institutions with designated halls, suites, or rooms for fraternity and sororities will be eligible for this study, but alumni who lived in those spaces as undergraduates will not be eligible as participants. **Can you confirm whether or not your institution meets these criteria?**

In return for your assistance I will gladly share my findings and potential implications at the conclusion of my study.

If you have any questions or would like to speak further about this study, please let me know. I can be reached at mgiacalone@ric.edu or (401) 456-2706.

This study is being conducted under the supervision of Dr. Kathy Peno, Professor of Adult Education, and been approved by the University of Rhode Island Institutional Review Board. She can be contacted at ktpeno@gmail.com or (401) 523-1477.

Thank you,
Michael Giacalone

Follow-Up E-Mail

Hello [NAME],

I am following up on the e-mail I sent on [DATE] regarding participants for my study about the experience of commuter students in fraternities and sororities.

Please let me know if you have any questions about the study. I can be reached at this e-mail or at (401) 456-2706.

Thank you,
Michael Giacalone

Appendix B: E-Mail Communication with Potential Participants

Initial E-Mail

Dear [NAME],

My name is Michael Giacalone. I am the Interim Assistant Director of Student Activities at Rhode Island College and a doctoral student in the University of Rhode Island/Rhode Island College joint Ph.D. in Education program. I am currently recruiting participants for my dissertation research on the experience of commuter students in fraternities and sororities.

[NAME] gave me your contact information as a potential participant for this study.

In order to participate, you will need to meet the following criteria:

- Alumnus/a who participated in a social fraternity or sorority
- Graduated within the last 5 years (May 2014 or later)
- Lived off-campus/commuted throughout your undergraduate career
- Attended the institution from which you graduated for at least two years

If you agree to participate, we will set up a 90-minute timeframe to do an interview using the free online platform, Zoom. The interview may not take that long, but I want to make sure that we have enough time to get through all the questions in one sitting. After the interview, you will have the opportunity to review the transcript, and I will share with you the general findings of the study once all participants have been interviewed.

Please let me know if you are interested, and/or if you have any questions. I hope that you will consider participating, and I look forward to hearing your story!

Thank you,
Mike

Follow-Up E-Mail 1 (Two Weeks After Initial E-Mail)

Hello [NAME],

I am following-up on the e-mail I sent on [DATE] regarding participation in my study about the experiences of commuter students in fraternities and sororities. You were recommended by [NAME] and I would love to find time to schedule an interview.

Please let me know whether or not you are interested, and if you have any questions.

Thank you,
Mike

Follow-Up E-Mail 2 (Four Weeks After Initial E-Mail)

Hello [NAME],

I am following-up on the e-mails I sent on [DATE] and [DATE] regarding participation in my study about the experiences of commuter students in fraternities and sororities. You were recommended by [NAME] and I would love to find time to schedule an interview.

Please let me know whether or not you are interested, and if you have any questions. This will be the last time I follow-up, but would love to include you in the study if you are interested.

Thank you,
Mike

Appendix C: Interview Protocol

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this study. The purpose of this study is to understand the experiences of commuter students who are members of fraternities and sororities. There is no foreseeable harm in this interview. It should take less than 90 minutes, however, you can have more time if you need it. Please provide as much detail and be as honest as possible with your responses.

1. What does it mean to belong?
2. Where there any experiences, people, or places on campus which made you feel like you belonged at your college/university?
   Probe: Could you share more about that
3. Where there any experiences, people, or places on campus which made you feel like you did not belong?
   Probe: Could you share more about that?
4. How, if at all, do you feel you benefitted from developing a sense of belonging?
   Probe: Could you give me an example?

Now we're going to transition to discussing your fraternity/sorority experience more specifically

5. Please tell me about your experience at college prior to joining your fraternity/sorority.
6. Why were you interested in joining a fraternity/sorority?
   Probes: Why was _____ important to you?
7. Tell me about your experience in your fraternity/sorority, starting from when you started thinking about joining up through today.
   Probes: Could you share some more about your experience while you were rushing/pledging/going through intake?
   … since you graduated?
8. What do you see as the benefits of being in a fraternity/sorority for a commuter student, if anything at all?
   Probe: Could you give me an example?
9. Please share some of the challenges, if there were any, about being a commuter in a fraternity/sorority.
   Probe: Could you give me an example?
   Probe: Time – traveling to campus, taking care of others, working?
   Follow-up: How did you overcome those challenges?
   Probe: How, if at all, do you think it would be different if you went to a college where most students lived on campus?

10. How did your college experience change once you joined your fraternity/sorority, if anything at all?
    Probe: Could you share a story that highlights this difference?

Let's talk about belonging more specifically within your fraternity/sorority

11. What did it mean to belong within your fraternity or sorority?
    Probe: Could you share with me a story that exhibited belonging?
12. If you or others felt like they did not belong – what did that look like?
    Probe: Again, could you share a story or example with me that exhibited that lack of belonging?
13. How, if at all, did your membership contribute to your sense of belonging at your college?
    Probe: Could you give me an example?

One of the goals of this research is to provide recommendations to chapters, administrators, and headquarters to support their commuter fraternity and sorority members better.

14. What recommendations would you give to chapters to support their members who are commuters better?
15. What recommendations would you give to college administrators to support their commuter students in fraternities and sororities better?
16. What recommendations would you give to national headquarters to support their members who are commuters better?

I have just two last general questions for you

17. What advice would you give a commuter student who is starting college and thinking about joining a fraternity or sorority?
    Probe: What about overcoming challenges?
18. Is there anything else you'd like to add or think I should know?

Thank you again for your participation.
Would you be willing to connect me with anyone you know who may fit the criteria for the study?

Once complete, I will e-mail you the transcription to review for accuracy and to give you the opportunity to provide any further commentary. Once all of the interviews have been transcribed and analyzed, you will have the opportunity to review and comment on the preliminary findings.

Appendix D: Participant Consent Form

Consent Form for Research

The purpose of this study will purpose of this study is to understand the experiences of fraternity and sorority members who commute to campus, specifically the way they experience a sense of belonging. If you choose to participate, you will be asked to fill out a personal information form and participate in one semi-structured interview. There are no anticipated risks or benefits to you, however your participation could help influence policies and practices regarding commuter students in fraternities and sororities.

STUDY TITLE
Understanding the Commuter Fraternity and Sorority Member Experience

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATORS
You have volunteered to take part in a research project described below. The researcher will explain the project to you in detail. You should feel free to ask questions. If you have more questions later, Dr. Kathy Peno, (faculty supervisor: 401-523-1477) or Michael Giacalone (student researcher: mgiacalone@ric.edu, 401-456-2706, the people mainly responsible for this study, will discuss them with you. You must be at least 18 years old to be in this research project.

Principal Investigator:
Kathleen Peno, Ph.D. Phone: (401) 523-1477 Email: ktpeno@gmail.com
Student Researcher:
Michael Giacalone Phone: (401) 456-2706 Email: mgiacalone@ric.edu

KEY INFORMATION

The purpose of this study is to understand the experiences of fraternity and sorority members who commute to campus, specifically the way they experience a sense of belonging. The primary research question is: "How do alumni who were commuter students and members of fraternities and sororities at primarily commuter institutions describe their member experience?"

If you choose to participate, you will be asked to fill out a participant information form and participate in one semi-structured interview. The expectation is that your interview will be audio recorded, transcribed, and stored in secure locations. You may still participate if you are not willing to be recorded. Should you choose to be recorded, you will have the opportunity to review the transcription for accuracy. Completing the information form should take less than 10 minutes, and the interview will take approximately 90 minutes.

There are no anticipated risks to participating in this study.

It is not expected that you will have any direct benefits from your participation.

THE UNIVERSITY OF RHODE ISLAND
IRB NUMBER: IRB1819-255
IRB APPROVAL DATE: July 23, 2019
IRB EXPIRATION DATE:

You will be provided a copy of this consent form. Taking part in this research project is voluntary. You don't have to participate and you can stop it any time.

INVITATION

You are invited to take part in this research study. The information in this form is meant to help you decide whether or not to participate. If you have any questions, please ask.

Why are you being asked to be in this research study?
You are being asked to participate in this study because you graduated from a primarily commuter institution, were a commuter student while at the institution from which you graduated, and joined a fraternity or sorority.

What is the reason for doing this research study?
The fraternity and sorority experience is largely thought to be associated with living on campus. This research is designed to understand what it is like for commuter students in fraternities and sororities, specifically considering how it influenced their sense of belonging.

What will be done during this research study?
You will be asked to participate in one semi-structured interview that could take up to 90 minutes, as well as fill out a form that provides information about yourself. You do not need to complete all sections of the form if you do not want to disclose certain information.

How will my interviews be used?
Your interviews will be used as data to be analyzed. Should you choose to be recorded, the recorded information will be sent to a third-party company for transcription. Some parts of your transcription may be sent to peer experts for review. Any personal information that could identify you will be removed prior to being shared.

What are the possible risks of being in this research study?
There are no known risks to you from being in this research study.

What are the possible benefits to you?
You are not expected to get any benefit from being in this study.

What are the possible benefits to other people?
The possible benefit will be a better understanding of the experiences of commuter students in fraternities and sororities which could help shape relevant policies and practices.

What are the alternatives to being in this research study?
There are no alternatives to this study, however, you are not obligated to participate.

What will being in this research study cost you?
There is no cost to you to be in this research study.

Will you be compensated for being in this research study?
There is no compensation for participating in this study.

What should you do if you have a problem during this research study?
Your welfare is the major concern of every member of the research team. If you have a problem as a direct result of being in this study, you should immediately contact one of the people listed at the beginning of this consent form.

How will information about you be protected?
Reasonable steps will be taken to protect your privacy and the confidentiality of your study data. You and the college/university from which you graduated will be assigned pseudonyms. The data will be stored in a locked cabinet in the investigator's office and will only be seen by the research team during the study and for five years after the study is complete.

The data will be stored electronically on a password-protected computer, with a back-up copy on a password-protected hard drive. All files will be encrypted for additional protection. Data will only be seen by the research team during the study and for five years after the study is complete.

The only persons who will have access to your research records are the study personnel, the Institutional Review Board (IRB), and any other person, agency, or sponsor as required by law. The information from this study may be published in scientific journals or presented at scientific meetings but the data will be reported as group or summarized data and your identity will be kept strictly confidential.

What are your rights as a research subject?
You may ask any questions concerning this research and have those questions answered before agreeing to participate in or during the study.

For study related questions, please contact the investigator(s) listed at the beginning of this form.

For questions concerning your rights or complaints about the research contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) or Vice President for Research and Economic Development:

- IRB: (401) 874-4328 / researchintegrity@etal.uri.edu.
- Vice President for Research and Economic Development: at (401) 874-4576

What will happen if you decide not to be in this research study or decide to stop participating once you start?
You can decide not to be in this research study, or you can stop being in this research study ("withdraw') at any time before, during, or after the research begins for any reason. Deciding not to be in this

research study or deciding to withdraw will not affect your relationship with the investigator, with the University of Rhode Island, your local or national fraternity or sorority, or your undergraduate institution.

You will not lose any benefits to which you are entitled.

Documentation of informed consent

You are voluntarily making a decision whether or not to be in this research study. Signing this form means that (1) you have read and understood this consent form, (2) you have had the consent form explained to you, (3) you have had your questions answered and (4) you have decided to be in the research study. You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep.

Participant Name:

_____
(Name of Participant: Please print)

Participant Signature:

_____ _____
Signature of Research Participant Date

Investigator certification:

My signature certifies that all elements of informed consent described on this consent form have been explained fully to the subject. In my judgment, the participant possesses the capacity to give informed consent to participate in this research and is voluntarily and knowingly giving informed consent to participate.

_____ _____
Signature of Person Obtaining Consent Date

AUDIO/VIDEO ADDENDUM TO THE CONSENT FORM FOR RESEARCH

By signing this consent form, I confirm that I give my permission for audio recording(s) of me, to be used for the purposes listed above, and to be retained for five years. You may still participate in this study if you are not willing to be recorded.

_____
Printed Name of Participant

_____ _____
Signature of Participant Date

_____
Printed Name of Person Obtaining Consent

_____ _____
Signature of Person Obtaining Consent Date

Appendix E: Participant Information Form

Name: _____

Name to be used in study: _____

Best contact information and method (*cell phone, e-mail, text, etc.*): _____

_____

College/University: _____

Fraternity/Sorority: _____

Semester and year you joined/pledged/crossed (*ex. Spring 2018*): _____

Academic year when you joined/pledged/crossed (*ex. Junior*): _____

What semester and year did you graduate (*ex. Spring 2020*): _____

Total number of fraternities and sororities on your campus when you were in college:

Approximate number of hours you worked per week while in college:

Any additional responsibilities you had while in college (i.e., responsible for taking care of children; assisted with taking care of family members; worked to pay family members' bills; etc.):

Fraternity/Sorority leadership positions held (if any):

Optional Demographic Information:

Race/Ethnicity: _____

Gender Identity: _____

Sexual Orientation: _____

On the next page, please describe your living arrangements for each of the years below, your commute method (*i.e., car, bus, dropped off*), and average commute time. Some examples could be: *At home with parent(s); Off-campus apartment with fraternity brothers; Off-campus house with friends not in sorority*.

YEAR OF COLLEGE	LIVING ARRANGEMENT(S)	COMMUTE METHOD	COMMUTE TIME (each way)
1			
2			
3			
4			
5 (if applicable)			
6 (if applicable)			
7 (if applicable)			

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